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HOW FEMININITIES ARE SHAPED BY RELIGION AND CULTURE

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BELIEFS ON 'POLLUTION' DURING CHILDBIRTH AND MENSTRUATION IN HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY

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A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Social Science

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DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

5 September 2000

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a qualitative study of how femininities are shaped by religion and culture. Since religion and culture is a very broad field, this study attempts to examine how femininities are shaped by notions of 'pollution' during menstruation and childbirth. These beliefs about pollution are thought to be part of religion and culture. This comparative study examines how beliefs on pollution differ in two groups of women namely Christian and Hindu women.

The sample of women for this study was chosen purposefully using the snowball sampling technique. A sample of six Hindu and six Christian women who were relatively similar in terms of education and income was chosen from the Rylands/Athlone area in the Western Cape. The limited size and nature of this sample makes generalizations difficult.

Individual interviews using in-depth, open-ended questions were conducted. The questions were aimed at providing insight into women's experiences of menstruation, menarche, sexual intercourse during menstruation and pregnancy, childbirth and the religious restrictions and taboos these experiences entailed. The aim was to describe women's subjective experiences of 'pollution'. The interviews were conducted in the homes of the women as this was likely to be an environment that respondents would feel comfortable in. Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed in order to present the findings in the respondent's own words as far as possible.

It was found that Hindu women faced religious and cultural restrictions where menstruation was concerned. They did not light the lamp in their shrines at home or attend temple services until the cessation of menstruation whereupon a ritual bath was taken. During childbirth Hindu women were seen as being 'most polluted' during the first ten days after giving birth. This period of ritual impurity ended forty days after giving birth. During this time, all the women in this study did not leave the house, cook, attend temple or light the lamp as a result of this 'impure' state. After performing a ritual bath and shaving the newborn's hair, these women were reintroduced into the community. In contrast, the Christian women in this study did not face any religious or cultural restrictions during menstruation and childbirth. The Christian women were actually encouraged to attend church as soon as possible after giving birth. Beliefs about 'pollution' during menstruation and childbirth were analyzed using structural-functional theory. It was argued that 'pollution beliefs' serve various functions in society, mostly to ensure gender inferiority and male dominance. There were also differences in the Hindu and Christian respondent's views on marriage and the sex of their children. It was found that the women's experiences of menstruation and childbirth were shaped to a large extent by religion and culture. Femininities were linked to religion and culture as attitudes on 'pollution' stemming from culture affect the way women view themselves and their bodies.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

As South Africa enters a new millenium, we are confronted with new issues and challenges. The apartheid era left us with a legacy of inequality and racism. By physically separating people of different cultures in terms of access of areas to live and work, apartheid also succeeded in increasing our ignorance of South Africa's rich cultural diversity. Women have traditionally been amongst the most silenced and oppressed in South Africa. This report is an attempt to present aspects of daily life that affect women in their own words. An attempt is also made to understand the cultural similarities and differences of two groups of women in the hope of increasing knowledge about various cultures. Religion and culture give strength to many women but at the same time, certain aspects of culture, like beliefs on 'pollution', have a negative impact on the way women view themselves.

Taboos and restrictions surrounding menstruation and childbirth are common in many cultures. For instance, amongst Australian aborigines, masculinity is associated with ritual cleanness and femininity is associated with uncleanness, the former being the sacred principal and the latter the profane (Gross, 1989). At the onset of menstruation, an aborigine girl is secluded by other women of the group and men are avoided. After the seclusion, the girl is welcomed into the group and her new status is celebrated. During childbirth younger women and men are prohibited from the place where the birth is occurring. After birth, mother and child are secluded from men for about five days and the mother avoids eating certain foods (ibid.). The Mae Enga of New Guinea

regard menstrual blood to be very dangerous (Meggitt, 1970). Menstrual blood is believed to sicken a man, turn his blood black and cause persistent vomiting.

In Hinduism childbirth is regarded as a 'polluting' event and the mother is often confined to the house for a period of forty days (Chalmers, 1993). During menstruation women refrain from religious worship in the home, attending temple services and the end of menstruation is marked by a ritual bath. While most of the above-mentioned studies (e.g. Meggitt, 1970 and Gross, 1989) study 'pollution beliefs' in some detail, they fail to ask whether the women concerned see themselves as 'polluting'. This is one of the central aims of my study. From my own life experience as a Hindu woman I struggle to come to terms with the contradictory ideas that menstruation is a natural event and that I am regarded as ritually impure during menstruation. I struggle to understand why motherhood is valued in Hinduism but why mothers are religiously impure after birth. This dissertation, for me, represents both a personal passion and an area of academic interest.

1.2 OPERATIONALIZATION OF CONCEPTS

In this study various terms are frequently used and are used specifically in relation to the topic. I now attempt to discuss how various terms were used in this study. The term 'femininity' is used to refer to characteristics of passivity, nurturing, gentleness and relation to motherhood, which are often associated with the female sex (Jary and Jary, 1995). Femininity and masculinity (gender) are distinguished from male and female (sex) in a biological sense (Borgatta and Borgatta, 1992). This study focuses more on gender than on sex.

‘Religion’ in this study refers to a system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, which unites believers into a community. Religion implies a belief in spiritual beings and the institutions and practices associated with these beliefs (Jary and Jary, 1995).

The term ‘culture’ was used to refer to the way of life of a people (Kuper, 1985 cited in Thornton, 1988). This includes manners, dress, language, rituals, norms of behavior and systems of belief (Jary and Jary, 1995). Culture is not something that humans are born with but which they need to interact with each other in order to survive. It must be learned during the process of education, socialization, maturing and growing old (Thornton, 1988).

The word ‘pollution’ in this study refers to events like birth, death and menstruation which entail danger and lead to seclusion of affected persons (Seymore Smith, 1986). In Hinduism, menstruating women are regarded as impure for a period of time. Since women undergo childbirth and menstruation, Hindu women are seen as more impure than men are. Childbirth and death cause impurity to relatives and purity can be restored by bathing (ibid.).

1.3 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The chief aim of this study was to describe women’s subjective experiences of ‘pollution’ during menarche, menstruation and childbirth. I wanted to find out whether experiences of ‘pollution’ differed amongst women of two different

religions/cultures and if so, what these differences were and what functions they served. I also wanted to examine what aspects of 'pollution' were specific to women of one particular culture/religion. In other words, I wanted to investigate the cultural specificities of 'pollution'. Finally, I tried to examine the impact of beliefs about pollution on femininities and how the women saw themselves.

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CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this section I attempt to provide a theoretical basis of how femininities are mediated by religion and culture. Since this is a very broad field, I have tried to use material related specifically to notions of 'pollution' after childbirth and during menstruation. These beliefs on 'pollution' are, as I have attempted to show, part of religion and culture. I begin by giving a brief synopsis of Hinduism and Christianity and examine the position of women in both religions. This is followed by an in-depth look at 'pollution' beliefs in Hinduism and Christianity. I also examine work on menstruation and finally, 'pollution' beliefs and femininities. I have started by providing a synopsis on Hinduism because I believe that some of the basic Hindu beliefs shaped what my respondents had to say.

2.2 HINDUISM – BRIEF SYNOPSIS

The word 'Hindu' is derived from the word 'Sindhu' which is the traditional name of the Indus river. In the Muslim-led empires of medieval India it was used to refer to all non-Muslim Indians irrespective of faith. It is a name given by outsiders to people who lived beyond the Indus River (Diesel and Maxwell, 1993). Consequently, it is not surprising that 'Hinduism' is not necessarily a term, which Hindus apply to themselves. Many 'Hindus' prefer to use the term 'Sanathan Dharma', the Eternal Way, to call their religion. The religion has no single founder, creed or prophet recognized by all Hindus as central to the religion. In addition, there are hundreds of internal divisions created by caste, community, language and geography (Coogan,

1995). Hinduism has no fixed creed and defies definitive systematization (Meiring, 1996).

Before the sacred lore was written down it existed for centuries as an oral tradition handed down from generation to generation and was committed to writing at a relatively late stage in its history (Klostermaier, 1994). Not all the sacred books of the Hindus are considered to hold the same degree of revelation. *Sruti* means 'that which has been perceived through hearing' and is revelation in the most immediate sense (Klostermaier, 1994). There are two main streams of *sruti*. Firstly, the Vedas comprise several categories of literature: the *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and early *Upanishads*. The Veda is divided into four parts: the *Rgveda* which contains over a thousand hymns addressed to various Gods, *Samaveda* a collection of instructions of appropriate recitation of hymns, *Yajurveda*, a book of Vedic ceremonies and *Atharvaveda* a collection of hymns and spells. Secondly, the *Puranas* are also considered *smriti*. The *Puranas* make claims to be direct revelations of the God to which they are affiliated and contain commands of that particular God (ibid.)

The second highest religious authority is called *smriti* or that 'which has been remembered'. The *smritis* are associated with family traditions in Hinduism. Amongst the *smritis*, the *Manusmriti*, a book of law, occupies a special place. Klostermaier (1994) argues that for daily life *smriti* is often of greater importance than *sruti* as it affects the life of Hindus in many details. A good deal of material on both *sruti* and *smriti* has been incorporated in the *Itihas Puarana*, literally ancient history. It comprises the two great epics: the *Mahabarata* and the *Ramayana*.

Hindus may acknowledge many deities but consider only one to be supreme, or they may consider all gods and goddesses equal but worship one as their favourite (Coogan, 1995). Gods and Goddesses all have their own iconographic characteristics. Many deities have four hands each carrying a weapon or flower to protect their devotees from harm. Every position of the hands or feet of a particular deity and every associated plant or animal has a special significance. In addition, one deity may have several incarnations (Coogan, 1995). Most deities that are male have female consorts. For example, Radha is the consort of Krishna and they are often worshipped together. Alternatively, some Goddesses are worshipped on their own (ibid.).

Within Hinduism, there are three possible routes to liberation: *karma-marga*, the path of works; *jnana-marga*, the path of knowledge and *bhakti-marga*, the path of loving devotion (Klostermaier, 1994). The path of loving devotion or *Bhakti Yoga* is the most popular amongst Hindus in all walks of life. Ultimately, as Krishna promises Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, if one surrenders to Krishna, or God, then one attains salvation.

The law of *karma* refers to a system of cause and effect that may span several lifetimes (Coogan, 1995). According to this law human beings gain merit or demerit from every action they perform. The human soul is also believed to be eternal and when someone dies the person is reborn in another form of existence. *Samsara*, or re-incarnation is a wheel of rebirths (Meiring, 1996). The balance of merit and demerit acquired in one lifetime determines the nature and quality of one's next life (Coogan, 1995). Liberation or *Moksha* from the chain of repeated rebirth happens when a person is unified with the Divine (Meiring, 1996).

A person's position in society depends on his or her social class or *varna* and sub-class or *jati*. There are four major *varnas* according to the Vedas. These are the priests (*brahmins*), the rulers and warriors (*kshatriyas*), the merchants or producers (*vaishyas*) and the servants (*shudras*) (Coogan, 1995). Members of the priestly, warrior and merchant groups were sometimes known as the 'upper' castes and their male members were known as 'twice born' because of their traditional initiation ritual of spiritual rebirth called *upayana*. Women and members of the *sudra* class are traditionally prohibited from reading the Vedas even though some of the Vedic hymns had female authors (ibid.).

2.2.1 HINDUISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 1897, due to a lack of labour in the sugar industry, the Natal government made arrangements for the importation of indentured labourers from India. About 350 Indian immigrants arrived in Durban in 1860 and most were Hindus from the Tamil- and Telegu-speaking communities from Madras (Prozesky and de Gruchy, 1995). A few days later mostly Hindi speaking people arrived and were followed by 'free' or 'passenger' Indians who were mostly Gujarati-speaking a few years later. Presently, Hindus are classified according to their linguistic-cultural backgrounds so that one can distinguish between Tamils, Telegus, Hindis and Gujaratis. Minor differences exist with regard to details of worship, rituals and social customs between these groups. Despite miserable working conditions on the sugar estates of the Natal north and South coasts, the Hindu Indians continued their customary worship and soon built small temples for their chosen deities (ibid.).

According to Maxwell et al. (1995) there are four main streams in South African Hinduism namely Sanathanist Hinduism which is traditional, ritualistic Hinduism: Arya Samaj whose focus is on one almighty, formless Deity; neo-Vedanta of which the most famous examples are the Ramakrishna centre and the Divine Life Society; and Hare Krishna, the majority of whom are affiliated to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Although the four main streams of South African Hinduism have their own distinctive features they do have certain things in common that unite them. They all believe in re-incarnation, which is governed by *karma*, the universal and impersonal law of cause and effect, the belief that there is one ultimate Divine Reality, the importance of *dharma* (duty or moral obligation) which includes principles such as telling the truth and living a pure life and the acceptance of certain scriptures like the *Vedas*, *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita* (Maxwell, 1995).

Maxwell et al (1995) further argue that the home and extended family which usually extends over three generations, have always been an essential part of Hindu religious life. It is through the family that most Hindus learn about their religious practices and teachings. Some form of daily worship is usually conducted in the shrines of most Hindu homes. Worship usually involves the lighting of a sacred oil lamp representing the divine light-energy and this is accompanied by prayers. This is believed to sustain prosperity in the home and is usually performed by the wife and mother (Maxwell et al, 1995). Most Hindus observe one or more life-cycle rituals or *samskaras* (Mullatti, 1995). These rituals start right from the time a woman conceives. This ceremony is performed by a priest on a pregnant woman for the birth of a male child. The next

the child, start of student life, marriage and so on. First pregnancy, naming of the child, marriage and death rituals continue to be the most important life-cycle rituals (ibid.).

2.2.2 THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN HINDUISM

Desai (1995) observes that to an outsider it may appear that Hindu beliefs and philosophy offers greater equality for women since the Divine is readily accepted as manifesting in male and female form in Hinduism. However, if Hindu women are observed socially they appear more oppressed than Western women. The authors of the legal texts express ambivalence towards woman. On the one hand she is elevated to the status of a Goddess, but on the other, she is seen as a temptress and a seducer. As a mother, she is revered but as a sexual partner she is seen as an impediment to her husband's spiritual progress (ibid.).

During the Vedic period (1500-500 B.C.E) there seems to have been a very positive value given to women (Coward, 1989). In the *Rg Veda* a new bride is considered auspicious and is associated with prosperity. Women's intellectual and spiritual quests were recognized. In the *Brahmana* texts, however, sons came to be valued more and rituals were performed to prevent the birth of daughters. In the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*, while men were entitled to seek *moksha* or salvation, women's goals were seen in terms of marriage. In the great Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, for instance, Sita figures as a devoted wife to Lord Rama. She chooses to follow her husband into the forest and live in exile for fourteen years. In the forest she is abducted by Ravana who asks her to marry him but she does not as she is devoted to Lord Rama. Sugirtharajah (1998) argues that some women see themselves in terms of giving

rather than receiving and their happiness is seen in terms of encouraging their husbands to achieve success. Many devout women perform fasts and vows for the well-being of their husbands and children (ibid.).

In the law books women are classified with the lowest caste irrespective of their social caste or origin (Klostermaier, 1994) They are considered ritually impure due to childbirth and menstrual pollution and were not entitled to study or write mantras (Manu 9,18, cited in Klostermaier, 1994). In the law books women are also accorded dependent status. A woman should be guided by her father in her childhood, her husband in her youth and her son in her old age and should not be granted independence. The ideal wife, according to Manu (Suhler, 1964), is one who is always cheerful, expert in household affairs and economical in expenditure (v150) She should never do anything to displease her husband whether he is dead or alive (v 156). After his death she should not even mention the name of another man (v. 157) Manu advises women to worship their husbands as a god even though the husband might be destitute of virtue, seeking pleasure elsewhere or devoid of good qualities (v. 154). All lawbooks devote sections to the 'impurity' caused by the menses (Klostermaier, 1994). Women were supposed to completely withdraw from the family for three days to an outhouse ,not to wear ornaments, to sleep on the floor and not to show themselves to anyone. According to the *Angirasasmṛiti*, a *smṛiti* text, the menstruating woman is on the first day like a *candala* (outcaste, the removers of refuse), on the second like a Brahmin murderer, on the third like a washerwoman and on the fourth day she is considered 'pure' again.

Marriage has been the most important and an almost compulsory life-cycle ritual for all Hindus (Mullatti, 1995). Marriage is regarded as a social duty toward the family and community (Chekki, 1996). Marriage is almost compulsory in order to get a male child (Mullatti, 1995). Ideally, virginity, chastity, abstinence and marital fidelity are stressed for women (Chekki, 1996). Mullati (1995) argues that girls are trained to be docile, chaste and segregated from boys at a young age.

2.3 CHRISTIANITY – BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Essentially Christianity is a monotheistic religion that centres around faith in one God and in Jesus Christ as the Saviour of humankind (Hale, 1995). The Apostles Creed opens with an affirmation of belief in 'God the Father' which is intended to affirm that Christians believe in a personal God (McGrath, 1997). To refer to God as 'the father' implies that we derive our origin from God and that God cares for us the way human fathers care for their children. Christianity holds that God became incarnate in Jesus who died on the cross and was resurrected. The belief in the Trinity or the sacred mystery of the Father, son and Holy Spirit as one triune (three-in-one-God) is central to Christianity (Hale, 1995). According to this doctrine there is one God but God comprises three elements – Father, Son and Holy Spirit worshipped as one. God the Father is understood as creator and sustainer of creation. Jesus is understood as the saviour and the Holy Spirit comforts and guides the church (Joubert, 1996).

Another way of understanding the Trinity is that God, who is the maker of heaven and earth has shown himself to man in three different ways – 'God the Father' sent 'God the Son' to earth and after he left 'God the Holy Spirit' continued God's work on

earth (Keene, 1993). Regarding the Holy Spirit, the Hebrew word *ruach* which has traditionally been translated as “spirit” can also be translated as “wind and breath” (McGrath, 1997). The Old Testament writers experienced God as one who refreshed Israel. The image of the wind conveyed this in a powerful manner since the summer winds brought coolness, which mitigated the intensity of the desert heat. The idea of spirit is also associated with life. When God created Adam, God breathed the breath of life into him, as a result of which he became a living being. The model of God as spirit thus conveys the insight that God is the one who gives life and the one who can bring the dead back to life. Before he left the earth Jesus promised his disciples that although he would not be physically present he would be present in his Spirit which would act as their guide. The doctrine of the Trinity has baffled theologians because the Bible contains no explicit teaching on the Trinity (Hale, 1995).

The words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth form the heart of Christianity (Joubert, 1996). For Christians he is the Messiah, the son of God who became human and through his death on the cross, he reconciled God and humanity. Jesus was born around the years 6-4BC. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus was conceived in his mother Mary through the power of the Spirit of God. After her marriage to a carpenter named Joseph, the couple were required to travel to Bethlehem in order to register in a Roman census. During their visit to Bethlehem the child was born and named Jesus which means ‘Saviour’ or ‘Anointed One’. Jesus’s teachings about God included a positive approach towards people who were not accommodated within the Jewish religious system such as the sick and ‘heathens’. Consequently Jesus transgressed many of the Jewish laws of purity, for instance by touching lepers and the dead. He also gave his attention to people who were seen as unimportant by the

patriarchal system of the day. Thus he gave his attention to women and accepted them as his disciples (Joubert, 1996).

The Bible is Christianity's holiest text and is seen as being inspired by God. The Christian Bible consists of two parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament, which is essentially the Hebrew Bible, consists of 39 books which explain the origin of the world and refers to the history of God's actions in the world in preparation for the coming of Christ (McGrath, 1997). The New Testament consists of 27 books composed in the century following Christ's death. They record the birth of Christ, his ministry and his resurrection (Hale, 1995). The New Testament includes the four 'gospels' of authors called Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (ibid.). The New Testament also includes Paul's letters or epistles (Keene, 1993).

The Ten Commandments articulate fundamental religious and social obligations and cover a person's correct relationship to God, parents, spouse and community (Hale, 1995). The first four commandments deal with one's relationship to the deity: one must worship God, keep the Sabbath and honour God's name. Following the commandment to honour one's parents, the next five commandments deal with ethical behavior which includes not stealing, coveting another's goods, bearing false witness, murder and committing adultery. In Matthew's gospel when a lawyer asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was he said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Matthew 22.36). This is the greatest and first commandment with the second being "You shall love your neighbour as Yourself" (Mark 12.29-31 and Luke 10.25-28, cited in Hale, 1995).

The church is a place where God is believed to reside on earth and where Christians gather for public worship or private devotion (Hale, 1995). Over the centuries the Christian church broke up into a number of different denominations. These denominations fall into three broad groups: the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches. These divisions differ with regard to beliefs on the use of icons for worship, the presence and importance of the Pope and Bishop, the importance of ritual or ceremony (Keene, 1993). Within Roman Catholicism, the largest of all Christian denominations, the pope and the sacraments occupy a very important place (Joubert, 1996). The sacraments are understood as the means whereby believers are united with Christ. The Orthodox denomination emphasizes the ceremonial nature of liturgy. Much of the liturgy takes place behind a screen of icons in front of the altar which is not accessible or visible to the public. The most important tradition in the Orthodox tradition is Easter where Christ's resurrection is celebrated. The Protestant tradition is made up of many churches each with their own forms of church government and theological accent. Churches with strong roots in the Reformation are the Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian and Reformed churches. The Protestant tradition tends to emphasize the authority of the Bible and the importance of personal faith. Pentecostal and other independent churches make up the other major Protestant group, distinguished by the emphasis on work of the Holy Spirit (Joubert, 1996).

The term 'liturgy' connotes the highly congregational aspect of Christian worship. A liturgical calendar or cycle of holy days moves between the two festivals of Christmas and Easter. Central to Christian ritual is the celebration of sacred acts known as 'sacraments'. The two sacraments: baptism (a ritual of initiation into the body of the

body of the faithful and usually also a naming ritual) and Eucharist (or the Lord's Last Supper, a ritual remembrance of the Passion) are believed to be instituted by Christ himself (Hale, 1995). There is no unanimity in Christianity as to the number of sacraments (Joubert, 1996). The purpose of the sacraments is to enable believers to participate visually and symbolically in the historical events upon which their faith is based. For instance, the use of water during baptism signifies the Christian passage from a life of sin to a new quality of life within the community and the resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament (ibid.).

2.3.1 CHRISTIANITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Portuguese mariners led by Bartholomew Dias arrived in South Africa in 1488 (Prozesky, 1995). They erected a *padrao*, a limestone pillar topped by a small cross overlooking the Indian Ocean in Algoa Bay. This marked the arrival of Christianity in South Africa. After 1795, Christianity was accepted by the black people of South Africa on a large scale. Christianity was brought to South Africa by Europeans, was later accepted by the black population and was also continued by the white descendants of the first Christian migrants – with some adaptations of their own, the most disturbing being the theology of apartheid. Over the centuries, however, people professing the Christian faith have become a large majority in South Africa, amongst both black and white people (Prozesky, 1995)

2.3.2 THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The period in which the Old Testament texts were written (twelfth to third century B.C) saw enormous changes in the economic, political and religious life of Israel (Ruether, 1974). A basic presupposition of the laws was that a male was responsible for his wife, children and livestock. A wife's sexuality belonged solely to her husband

and she had to be a virgin at the time of marriage. A wife who did not produce children for her husband was not fulfilling her duty as a wife and it was customary for her to offer a female slave to bear for her (Gen 16:1-3 and 30: 1-3, cited in Ruether, 1974). Barrenness was seen as shameful and barren women were deprived of the honour attached to motherhood which was the highest status a woman might achieve (ibid.).

Judaism, as the mother of Christianity had a religious legal tradition with clear regulations (Frank, 1993). According to Levitical Law when a woman was menstruating she was in a state of impurity for seven days or as many days as menstrual flow continued. Anyone or anything that touched her was also regarded as unclean. Similarly, at childbirth, according to Leviticus, forty days after the birth of a son and eighty days after the birth of a daughter the mother was regarded as impure. (ibid.). Male children were a source of prestige and validation and the birth of a daughter was not considered important (Schmidt, 1989). During the Talmudic period (499AD) menstruating women were forbidden entrance into synagogues. According to the Law of the Old Testament two things would render a person impure: semen and menstrual blood (Frank, 1993). These laws recognized leprosy and other skin diseases, contact with a corpse, bodily emissions of all types in members of both sexes, sexual intercourse and childbirth as factors that caused uncleanness. The restriction on synagogue attendance, however, applied only to women. To summarize then, according to the Old Testament laws women were seen as legal non-persons. She was dependent on and inferior to men and was seen as ritually unclean during childbirth, menstruation and after sex.

2.3.3 THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

New Testament writers claim Jesus Christ as their author and arguably, the way Jesus treated women is an example of how women should be treated after his departure (Massey, 1989). Jesus could be described as a 'religious and social revolutionary' who spoke out against injustices and evil of all description (Massey: 1989). Women held a high position in the life of Jesus. For instance, when Jesus set out for Gallilee, taking the shortest route that led through Samaria, he encountered a Samaritan woman. The first noteworthy feature of this incident is that he spoke to a Samaritan although the Jews of Christ's days avoided Samaritans. The daughters of the Samaritans were thought to be 'menstruants from the cradle' and a Samaritan woman was regarded as unclean at all times (ibid.). Even a vessel she touched would be unclean, yet Jesus asked for a drink from the vessel she was carrying. A second possible social violation was that he conversed publicly with a woman even though the Jews regarded it inappropriate for a man to address a woman in public.

Another example was that of a woman who had suffered 'an issue of blood for twelve years' (Massey, 1989). The woman knew that she was in a state of uncleanness and to touch a male or to be touched by him, was forbidden. At this time, Jesus was in a crowd of people who were pushing against one another when he asked 'who touched my clothes?' The woman, naturally was afraid of his reaction. But Jesus did not rebuke her. Instead he said "daughter your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your affliction". These two incidents illustrate that Jesus was not concerned with the ordinances of Judaism where individuals were thought to be pure or impure religiously (ibid). The thought of touching menstruating women was not disturbing to Jesus as it was to many people of his day (Schmidt, 1989).

Presently, women seem to occupy an ambivalent position in Christianity. Christian feminists (Daly, 1986, Ruether, 1983) express anger at the fact that male monotheism is so taken for granted in Christianity that it is seldom questioned. God is seen as being 'male' and is seen as addressing males directly, adopting them as his "sons". Women and children represent those ruled over by males. They relate to man as he relates to god. A symbolic hierarchy is set up: God-male-female. Women are no longer connected to God directly, they are connected to him secondarily, in relation to men (Ruether, 1983). The idea of divinity as male is reinforced by the fact that God is called Father, Christ is male and the angels have male names (Daly, 1986). Not only did woman have her origin in man, she was also the cause of his downfall (Daly, 1983). Women are blamed for being the cause of 'original sin'. The Church has also been criticized for excluding women from the hierarchy. Even today, Catholic women cannot become priests

2.4 HINDU WOMEN AND CHILDBIRTH 'POLLUTION'

In order to outline beliefs on 'pollution' I will begin by focussing on studies about childbirth and 'pollution' in India. Jacobson (1989) discusses rituals surrounding pregnancy and childbirth in Nimkhera, a village in Madhya Pradesh state in central India. There were just over six hundred people in the village in 1974 and about eighty percent of these villagers were Hindu. According to Jacobson, a woman's prime role is to be a mother, particularly a mother of sons. Women believe that a son will remain part of their family whereas a daughter will marry into another family. This finding is supported by Chalmers (1993) who found that a woman who has only daughters has a

status which is a little above that of a barren woman. Through bearing children she finds economic security and social approval.

Pregnancy is a state that is encouraged and failing to conceive is regarded as a feminine defect. At the onset of labour the mother-to-be is separated from others (Jacobson, 1989). A woman in labour or who has just given birth is called a *jachcha*. A *jachcha* is in a highly polluted state similar to that of the untouchables and is also seen as polluting to others (Jacobson, 1989). A similar view is expressed by Jeffrey et al (1989) who argue that childbirth pollution is the most severe pollution of all, far greater than that associated with menstruation or death. Anyone who touches a *jachcha* or her newborn infant becomes ritually polluted and must take a bath before coming into contact with others (Jacobson, 1989). It is believed that ingesting food cooked by a *jachcha* is dangerous for a man and less so for his children. A *jachcha* is therefore absolved from cooking after giving birth (Jeffrey et al, 1989). It is also believed that a man's health would be seriously affected by direct contact with defilement during sexual intercourse after childbirth. Furthermore, after childbirth a woman 'does not participate in any worship services for Gods and Goddesses or touch the household's holy images' (Jacobson, 1989). By virtue of performing her work, the midwife, or *dai* who is considered to be 'polluted', sometimes even in the eyes of her own relatives (Jeffrey et al, 1989). Touching a labouring woman's genitals is considered defiling. Consequently, the left hand, or the inauspicious hand is used for such tasks.

The *jachcha* usually gives birth in a squatting position in a dimly lit room. Swain (1980) who conducted a study in rural Orissa explains that an ill-ventilated, isolated

room is selected for the delivery. Most of the material used during the labour, such as clothes or mats, have to be discarded as they are 'untouchable' (Swain, 1980). The act of cutting the umbilical cord is extremely polluting and is done only by a midwife (Jacobson, 1989). After cleaning remnants of the birth off the floor, the floor is purified with cow-dung. For the three days after the birth of the child, the mother and child are especially 'polluted' because 'nine months menstrual blood comes out at a baby's birth' (Jacobson, 1989: 65). During these three days no one but the midwife touches the mother and infant. This view is confirmed by Swain (1990) who contends that since the mother and child are considered untouchable, outsiders are not allowed inside the room. Members of the father's family are also considered 'polluted' even less so than mother and child (Jacobson, 1989). The post-partum period of pollution ends about forty days after the birth of the child. The mother bathes, her room is cleansed with cow dung and her bedclothes are washed (ibid.). This special cleansing bath takes place some days after the delivery and is associated with the *chhati* or naming ceremony of the child (Jeffrey et al, 1989). She then is ready to resume her normal life. The newborn baby is considered ritually impure until the baby's head is shaved (Jeffrey et al, 1989; Jacobson, 1989). The baby's hair is said to be contaminated because of its contact with the mother's blood. In the first year or two of life the child's head must be ritually shaved to remove the polluted 'birth hair' (Jacobson et al, 1989). The first hair cutting ceremony is an important ritual in the child's life.

Thompson (1985) who conducted a study in a Malwa village in central India argues that the rites to do with pregnancy (which is not a polluting state) celebrate a woman's change in social status but that the pollution surrounding birth denigrates the physical

process of giving birth. She goes further to explain that women's power to pollute whether at menstruation or after birth is perceived by both men and women as dangerous. It has the potential to cause misfortune. The women in Thompson's study emphasized the dangers that they themselves incurred rather than dangers that others could face when menstrual taboos were violated. Thompson concludes that although a woman's power to pollute is disruptive she cannot use this power without damaging herself.

The issue of 'pollution' is dealt with (although not in great detail) in a study done by Homans (1982) with twenty-six Asian (immigrants from Asia) and twenty-six British women. These women were first interviewed during their initial visit to a consultant antenatal clinic and were then given a second long, structured interview in their homes. Homans found that Asian women who have borne sons have a higher status than those that have borne only daughters. According to the Asian women, in Punjab, most births take place at home. Women in their sixth or seventh month of pregnancy return to their mother's home. The Asian women in Homans' study did not attend temple after childbirth as they were seen as being in an 'impure' state due to loss of blood. The British women, however, were not aware of any menstrual taboos after childbirth but they had heard about prohibitions on washing their hair and having a hot bath. More British than Asian women wanted their husbands to be present for the birth of their child as some Asian women themselves considered childbirth to be 'polluting'. Most of the British women went to church immediately after childbirth. The Asian women, on the other hand, could not go to the temple until after forty days (Homans, 1982).

The literature discussed thus far is based on research done mostly in India, with the exception of Homans (1982). In order to ascertain whether Hindus who live outside India have similar beliefs on 'pollution', I now focus on a South African study by Chalmers (1993). According to Chalmers, since 1960 there have been few studies that focus on Indian customs surrounding childbirth in South Africa. Chalmer's study confirms that 'pollution' beliefs do exist amongst Hindu South Africans. She argues that women return to their mothers' home about a month before delivery. She adds that 'ritual pollution from childbirth lasts for 31 days amongst the Tamil (Hindus) and for 40 days amongst the Moslems' (Chalmers, 1993: 302). Chalmers findings on the shaving of the child's first hair seem to confirm those of Jacobson (1989). According to Chalmers, the child's first hair is shaved in the third, fifth, ninth or eleventh month after childbirth. In a study done by Chalmers and Meyer (1993) it was found that Hindu women were more conservative and less subject to westernized views and practices regarding childbirth than Muslim women. Presently, more South African Hindu women are questioning restrictions that deny them the privilege of entering the altar where deities are situated because women are regarded as 'unclean' during menstruation (Chetty, 1992)

2.5 CRITIQUE OF PREVIOUS STUDIES AND AIMS OF MY PROJECT

From the literature presented in the section above we see that many of the studies (e.g. Jacobson, Chalmers) focus on various aspects of childbirth. For instance, Chalmers focuses on explaining other life-cycle rituals as well as childbirth. While this gives an overall picture of various Hindu rituals, I believe that very little in-depth information is obtainable and a clear focus on a single ritual is lacking. Consequently, I have chosen to focus on notions of 'pollution' during childbirth in Hindu and Christian

women and provide an in-depth account of their experiences. Furthermore, there are no South African studies that I am aware of, of Hindu women that deal specifically with 'pollution'. My project thus attempts to fill a gap in the existing research. Regarding methodology, most of the above-mentioned studies used in-depth interviews, which I felt was a suitable method of collecting detailed data.

2.6 MENSTRUATION

Beliefs about menstruation have been placed in the context of pollution beliefs. Menstruation has also been seen as excretion (Laws, 1990). What is most significant about menstruation is who may say what to whom. This is what Laws terms 'menstrual etiquette'. In accordance with the 'rules' of menstrual etiquette, women may not draw attention to menstruation in any way. In an exploratory study using life-history interviews with 14 men between the ages of 21 and 40, Laws found that a number of these men did not see menstrual blood as being like other blood. Most men in Law's study said that menstrual blood was 'dirty' and described the smell of menstrual blood as being offensive. A study by Britton (1996) using in-depth interviews with 20 English women between the ages of 18 and 39 revealed similar findings. When considering the actual bleeding experience during menstruation women used negative words indicating shame and fear. The women in this study used words like 'yucky', 'dirty' and 'messy' to describe menstrual blood. These women also thought that menstrual blood would be polluting to men during the sexual act. Drawing on oral history interviews with Australian women, Murray (1998) found that menstruation stopped women from performing certain activities such as swimming, bathing, playing sport and engaging in sexual intercourse. Most women in this study discussed menstruation with female friends and sisters but did not discuss

menstruation openly with their families. Finally, media representation of menstruation teaches girls and women to view a natural bodily function as negative or as a 'curse'. This, arguably, perpetuates an ideology of gender inferiority (Luke, 1997).

2.7 TABOO AND 'POLLUTION'

Cross-cultural studies reveal a wide range of distinct rules for conduct regarding menstruation that may have different or even opposite purposes and meanings. What follows is a brief outline of different theories of 'the menstrual taboo'. Firstly, some theories view menstrual taboos as a reflection and a source of female oppression. However, these theories seldom recognize that taboos surrounding the menstrual cycle may restrict the behaviour of others more than that of the menstruating woman herself. Secondly, psychoanalytical theories, such as that of Stephens' (cited in Buckley and Gotlieb, 1988) hold that 'castration anxiety' is responsible for menstrual taboos because he presumes that the thought of a person bleeding from the genitals is frightening to a person who has intense castration anxiety. The relevance of Stephens' findings are highly controversial as the issue of whether castration anxiety can even exist in non-western societies is questionable. Thirdly, there is a set of theories that locate the origins of menstrual taboos in rational responses to practical problems: utilitarian strategies that have extended irrationally to various apparently unrelated domains in culture. An example of a practical explanation of menstrual taboos is a theory by Schick (1920, cited in Buckley and Gotlieb, 1988) who posited the existence of bacterial 'menotoxins' in menstrual blood which cause plants to wilt and pickles to go bad. However, there is a possibility that these theories tell us more about the way in which our own culture symbolizes threat since the very existence of menotoxins has been questioned. Finally, we have to consider structural-functional

theories such as Mary Douglas's analysis of the symbolic structure of social systems (Buckley and Gotlieb, 1988). First, however, it is essential to examine what structural functionalism is.

2.8 STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

Structural-functionalist theories are those that view societies as social systems and features of social structures are explained in terms of their contribution to the maintenance of these systems (Jary and Jary, 1995). For example, religious ritual can be explained in terms of the contribution it makes to social integration. Society is seen as a biological organism and its parts can be analyzed in terms of their functions for maintaining the 'body social' (Borgatta and Borgatta, 1992). Talcott Parsons' (1902-1979) brand of functionalism which is known as 'structural functionalism' refers to human action which is structured around norms, roles and institutions, all of which are necessary for preserving society (Court, 1987). Parsons suggests that society is a system, a complex whole made up of separate but interlocking parts. These parts are called sub-systems, and these sub systems are made up of interconnecting parts. The sub-systems all need each other for certain essential requirements, e.g. the economic sub-system needs the education sub-system to supply it with skilled workers. Roles and social institutions, as the fundamental structural parts of social systems can be analyzed in terms of the 'functions' that they fulfil within a social system. Silas (1968) argues that structural-functionalism consists of phrasing empirical questions on one of the following forms or combination of them: 1) what observable patterns can be alleged to exist in the phenomenon studied? 2) What conditions from previous operations can be alleged to exist in the phenomena studied? 3) when changes in the patterns can be alleged to take place, what resultant conditions can be discovered? .

The first question asks “what structures are involved?” The second asks, “what functions have resulted?” And the third asks, “ what functions take place in terms of a given structure?”

Theorists within the structural-functional tradition have interpreted menstrual practices as expressions of a basic sexual antagonism resulting from exogamous marriage, either directly or indirectly through exogamous marriage’s effects on male solidarity and domination over women (Paige and Paige, 1981). According to Mary Douglas’s analysis of the symbolic structure of social systems, pollution beliefs are used to regulate social relations, therefore an analysis of the patterns and significance of these beliefs reveal the underlying tensions in a society. Douglas argues that when pollution beliefs are applied to women they can be used to bind men and women to their allotted roles.

Douglas (1966: 35) defines ‘dirt’ as ‘matter out of place’. According to Douglas (1966: 35) “This implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt, then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements”. Douglas further argues that dirt is a relative idea. For instance shoes are not dirty in themselves but it is dirty to place them on the table. Similarly, holiness and unholiness need not be opposites – they can be relative categories. What is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another. For example many Hindus believe that simple types of pollution are removed by water and greater degrees of pollution are removed by cow-dung. Cow dung, is intrinsically impure and can even defile a god, but is pure

relative to a mortal. Furthermore, Douglas (1966,115) argues that “we cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.”

According to Douglas (1966) pollution beliefs have many functions. We would expect to find that pollution beliefs in a culture are related to its moral values since these form part of the structure of ideas for which pollution behaviour is a protective device. Pollution beliefs reinforce the cultural and social structure and can reduce ambiguity in the moral sphere. Pollution beliefs regulate contact with blood, excreta, vomit, cooked food and so on. There is no common pattern of pollution observances – in some communities menstrual pollution is feared while in others it is not feared at all. These differences become interesting as an index of different cultural patterning. Pollution beliefs are cultural phenomena and they are institutions that can only keep their forms by bringing pressure to bear on deviant individuals. The dangers attached to pollution act as a means of enforcing conformity. Pollution rules have the function of ‘marshalling disapproval when it lags’ (Douglas: 1966, 132). They provide a kind of impersonal punishment for wrongdoing and this provides a means of supporting the accepted system of morality (ibid.) Most pollution beliefs have a simple remedy for undoing their effects. For instance there are rites for burying, washing and untying. Pollution beliefs derive from rational activity, from processes of classifying and ordering experience. However, they are not produced by strictly rational or conscious processes (ibid.).

Just as Douglas (1966) argues that purity and impurity are relative ideas, Durkheim (1915) argues that the boundaries between pure and impure things are often blurred. Durkheim explains that religious life gravitates about two contrary poles between which there is the same opposition between pure and impure, the divine and the diabolic. However, as Durkheim observes, it frequently happens that an impure thing or evil power becomes a holy thing without changing its power. For instance, in some societies menstrual blood, although regarded as impure, is used as a remedy against illness. So the pure and the impure are not two separate classes but two varieties of the same class, which includes all sacred things. The pure is made out of the impure. Durkheim concludes that the two poles of religious life correspond to the two opposed states through which all social life passes. In the states of propitiously sacred and unpropitiously sacred there is the same contrast as between the states of collective well being and ill being (ibid.). Durkheim further suggests that incest prohibitions are a consequence rather than a cause of exogamy (Paige and Paige, 1981). He considered men's fear of menstrual blood to be central to the development of social solidarity of the clan. He believed that members of "primitive" clan societies believe literally that they share the same blood and their identity as a social unit is endangered if any of that blood is spilled. Since kinswomen menstruate they are threatening to the clan solidarity and fear of contact with menstrual blood is a major source of sexual antagonism (ibid.).

Levi-Strauss (1969) challenges Durkheim's theory by arguing that menstrual taboos are not universal. Levi-Strauss uses the example of Winnebago Indians who visit their mistresses and take advantage of the privacy of the prescribed isolation of these women during their menstrual period to illustrate that the horror of menstrual blood is

not universal (ibid.). Levi-Strauss argues that a woman's menstrual blood is as dangerous to her husband as to members of her own clan (Paige and Paige, 1981). Men in general regardless of their clan membership are endangered by menstrual blood. The fear of kinswomen's menstrual blood cannot, therefore, be a cause of exogamy as Durkheim theorizes (ibid.).

Recent structural-functional research and theory have attempted to explain cross-cultural variations in the intensity of menstrual pollution practices by examining structural causes of broader sexual antagonism. On the basis of observations of the Mae Enga in the New Guinea highlands, Meggitt has proposed a causal relationship between the practice of marrying women from enemy groups and an aggravated fear of women. In this society, marriage generally takes place between hostile, feuding kin-groups so that in-marrying women are enemies as well as spouses (Paige and Paige, 1981). The male members of the Mae Enga group regard menstrual blood as truly dangerous (Meggitt, 1970). They believe that contact with menstrual blood will sicken a man, turn his blood black and corrupt his vital juices so that his skin darkens and wrinkles until he eventually dies. Furthermore, since women are seen as unclean and each act of coitus increases a man's chances of being contaminated, there is also the fear that copulation is detrimental to male well being. The placenta is also associated with menstrual blood and during parturition a woman is regarded as unclean and is secluded for four days. Meggitt (1970: 140) concludes that "we might expect to find the notion of feminine pollution emphasized in societies where affinal groups are seen – for whatever reason- as inimical to one's own group, but absent or of little significance where marriages usually occur between friendly groups."

2.9 FEMININITIES, 'POLLUTION', HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY

In Hindu Brahmanical culture, the Sanskrit word *suddha* means 'purity' (Coward, 1989). A prepubescent unmarried girl, water from a holy river and a temple are all considered *suddha*. On the other hand, contact with leather, dogs, objects made of leather and discharges from the human body are considered *asuddha*. Degrees of purity are also recognized. For example, gold is considered more *suddha* than copper. Just as purity and impurity (*suddha* and *asuddha*) is one crucial axis of Hindu life, it is bisected by another equally important axis of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness (*subha* and *asubha*). The example of childbirth provides a good example of how the pure-impure axis intersects with the auspiciousness axis. Childbirth is auspicious if it occurs under the right circumstances, but the act of childbirth itself which involves the discharge of bodily fluids, renders the mother and baby impure. But this impurity pales into insignificance in light of the auspicious character of childbirth, particularly the birth of a son. Thus, Coward (1989) concludes that the life of the Hindu is rendered complex by the constant crossing of the purity and auspiciousness axes. However, it is possible that women, being the source of two powerful states of impurity, namely menstruation and birth from which men are exempt, are classified as less pure than men (Marglin, 1985).

I would argue that some Hindu scriptures perpetuate a negative view of menstruation. For instance, the *Mahabharata* suggests that, should a menstruating woman look at an object, the gods will not take it in sacrifice (cited in Coward, 1989). Nor can she be in the neighbourhood of the ancestral offering or the forefathers will be unappeased for thirteen years. This negative view of menstruation is also reinforced by *The Laws of Manu*. According to Manu (v62, p178) the impurity that is caused by birth falls on the

parents who can become pure again by bathing. When a man touches a menstruating woman, an outcaste or a woman in a childbed, he can become pure again by bathing (v85). A menstruating woman becomes ritually pure by bathing after the menstrual secretion has ceased to flow (v66,). If a man has touched a menstruating woman, an outcaste, a woman in a childbed, he becomes pure by bathing (v 85).

In Judaism the ancient laws of impurity in regard to menstruation are known as the laws of niddah (Yanay, 1997). According to Levitical laws when a woman was menstruating she was in a state of impurity (Frank, 1993). There were laws governing the discharges from the sex organ of men and women (ibid.) If a man had an involuntary emission of semen during the night, he was to bathe, wash his garments and remain unclean until the following evening. A woman had to count seven days as the period of uncleanness for her regular menstruation. If a married couple had sexual relations while she was menstruating, the death penalty was imposed on the male and female (ibid.). Similarly, at childbirth a woman was rendered unclean for forty days after the birth of a son and eighty days after the birth of a daughter (Frank ibid.). During the medieval period, additional prohibitions arose in Jewish law. For example, menstruating women were forbidden entrance into synagogues. A midwife who had delivered a child was also treated as a menstruating woman and was forbidden to enter a synagogue. Judaism came to have less influence on Christianity as it developed into a gentile community, especially after its establishment in the Roman Empire. The canonical traditions stressed that a menstruating woman should not receive Holy Communion. However, within the patristic tradition there was another stream of thinking which approached the question of bodily functions in a very different way. During the fourth century The Apostolic Constitutions (book 5, 27-30)

expressed the idea that the Jewish practice regarding issues of purity and impurity are to be rejected. Neither sexual relations, nor childbearing, nor menstruation could defile a person (ibid.). As will be explained further in chapter six, menstrual taboos gradually fell away as Christianity moved away from Judaism. For this reason, there is very little literature that I could find that deal directly with 'pollution' in Christianity.

The creation myth (where God commanded Adam not to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil but Eve persuades Adam to disobey this commandment) is used to paint childbearing in a negative light. Women are seen as responsible for leading men astray. Adam and Eve were given different punishments. Adam will find it difficult to provide a livelihood because the earth has been cursed and growing food will be difficult. Eve's punishment is that she will have pain in childbearing and yet she will desire her husband. In this way, childbearing is seen as a 'punishment' (Drury, 1997). However, this is an Old Testament myth and it is unlikely that Christian women today would see childbirth as punishment.

The Old Testament provides more information on 'pollution'. Blood is neither a positive nor negative substance in ancient Israelite and Christian usage. It depends on what sort of blood it is, who touches it and how it is utilized. In the Old Testament, animal blood used in sacrifices is seen as a purifying agent. The pollution of the priests and the community as a whole was symbolically cleansed by the right performance of the blood ritual. However, animal blood was considered defiling when it was "eaten", so the blood had to be drained from an animal before consumption. Leviticus employed an elaborate set of taboos and regulations to control the negative

effects of menstruation. In Revelation, blood is never used literally, but only metaphorically as “the blood of the lamb” referring to Christ’s death. This demonstrates a departure from the Jerusalem cult’s sacrificial use of blood. The lamb’s blood accomplished redemption for all and created a new community in which all members were symbolically priests. Menstrual blood is not explicitly mentioned in Revelation. One text, however, mentions it obliquely. In the letter to Thyatira, Jezebel, the false prophetess, is thrown “on her sickbed” and those who commit adultery with her are judged. The term ‘sick’ is a euphemism for a woman in menstruation in Lev 15:33 and the image in Revelation seems to be of men who lie with Jezebel while she is impure because of menstruation. The author of Revelation perpetuates the purity traditions of the Middle East in which women’s blood is seen as dangerous and contaminating (Hanson, 1993).

Sexuality, as well as menstruation has traditionally been a taboo topic. Regarding sex, the Bible teachings are far from exhaustive and have been a subject of contention for decades (Sheler, 1991). In every age Christian and Jewish teachers have understood God’s admonition to “be fruitful and multiply” to mean that sex is primarily for procreation. For many early Christian thinkers, sexual pleasure was a problematic concept. During the sixth century the church compiled “penitentials” or lists of sins and their prescribed penances. Oral and anal intercourse, because they did not have conception as their goal were judged more harshly in the penitentials than premeditated murder.

2.10 CONCLUSION

After carefully examining the above-mentioned literature, it can be concluded that 'pollution' beliefs exist in both Hinduism and Christianity, although the forms and extent to which they are believed may differ. As the following chapters will show, how women see themselves and their bodies is significantly shaped by religion and culture. As was already mentioned, there has been research on 'pollution' done in India, but very little research on 'pollution' has been done on South African Indian women. Furthermore, very few of the studies provide an in-depth account of 'pollution' beliefs. My research is thus an attempt to fill these gaps.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Quantitative and qualitative research methods have different goals. Quantitative methods allow the researcher to measure the reactions of large numbers of people to a limited set of questions. Usually, people's responses are derived from pre-determined response categories. Qualitative methods, by contrast, permit the researcher to study issues in depth and in detail. The absence of predetermined categories of analysis allows depth, openness and detail. Qualitative research thus produces a wealth of detail about a smaller number of people (Patton, 1990). The aim of qualitative research is to learn about how and why people behave and think rather than focussing on what people do or believe on a large scale (Ambert and Adler, 1995). When designing research one has to think about the goals and aims of the research and then carefully decide which research method to use. Quantitative and qualitative research methods are not necessarily opposing methods and may be used together in the same research project (ibid).

In my study qualitative methodology was seen as being most suitable. My aim was to describe how femininities are shaped by beliefs about 'pollution' which are part of religion and culture. This required detailed information on 'pollution' beliefs and in-depth explanations. Furthermore, in keeping with an inherent assumption of qualitative research design, I wanted to focus on subjective meanings and to capture aspects of the social world rather than trying to develop objective measures with numbers (Neuman, 1997). The goal of using qualitative methods is to treat people as

creative, compassionate human beings, not as objects (Neuman, 1997) and this is what I wanted to do in my study.

In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted in order to investigate 'pollution' beliefs. An interview guide with a list of questions that were to be explored in the course of the interview was used (see Appendix A). The interview guide provided topics that I was free to explore and probe and at the same time, it ensured that basically the same information was obtained from a number of people by covering the same ground (Patton, 1990). This had the advantage of allowing respondents the space to express their thoughts in their own ways. The participants were able to describe their perspectives on issues in a subjective way (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Using in-depth interviews, I was able to obtain information that was very detailed. Since an interview guide was used I was able to have some direction in the interview which prevented respondents from straying from the topic. Another advantage was that immediate follow-up and clarification were possible (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). If there was a question that a respondent did not clearly understand, I was able to explain myself more clearly and if there was something that I did not understand I was able to ask about what was actually meant.

A further benefit of in-depth interviews was that I was able to establish rapport with participants. I asked more sensitive questions towards the end of the interview and was surprised to find that the women were able to discuss intimate details about sex and menstruation. I was also able to note non-verbal responses and body language. A disadvantage with qualitative interviews is that it was difficult to tell whether participants were being truthful or holding back information.

3.2 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The objectives of collecting this data can be described as feminist objectives. According to Geiger (1990) feminist objectives presuppose gender as a central analytical concept, they serve as a corrective for androcentric notions of what is 'normal' by establishing a new knowledge base for understanding women's lives, they accept women's own interpretations of their experiences. One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspectives of women's experiences (Harding, 1987). Feminist objectives emphasize understanding, rather than controlling, the information generated. When designing the interview guide I kept in mind the fact that I wanted to explore an issue that women themselves considered problematic and I felt that women's experiences should provide the resources for research. These experiences differ according to race and class. Before arriving at the topic of 'pollution', pilot interviews were conducted which found 'pollution' to be a recurring theme. For this reason, 'pollution' was something that was important to the women themselves. I wanted to portray different positions in terms of race and class and show some ways that women resist or challenge 'culture' and what is expected of them. I also wanted to redress the balance of the wealth of androcentric sociological research. While I would argue, like Harding (1987), against a distinctive feminist method of inquiry, the aims and objectives of this study are clearly feminist.

3.3 SAMPLING

Before choosing a sample I drew up a set of criteria that possible participants had to meet. I was looking for Coloured and Indian participants between the ages of 25 and 50 who had lived in the Western Cape for at least five years, who had children and who had a keen interest in religion/culture and would describe themselves as religious. In other words, the sample was selected purposefully rather than randomly. I chose to interview Hindu and Christian women for my study. Being a comparative study, I wanted to highlight differences in 'pollution beliefs' and to analyze how these differences shaped femininities. If I had chosen Hindu and Muslim women as my sample, for instance, there would have been more similarities than differences in my results. For example, Muslim women do not perform daily prayers during menstruation, which is similar to the case of Hindu women who do not light the lamp during menstruation. By choosing to use Christian and Hindu women as my sample, I was able to highlight differences in beliefs about pollution.

Before each interview I met the possible participants in order to get to know them better and in order to ensure information-rich responses. Using the snowball sampling technique I located a few key participants (e.g. an Anglican minister's wife) who then referred me to other women who had an interest in religion and who would be willing to participate. This technique allowed career women to recommend women who were housewives and vice versa. In this way I was able to obtain information from both career women and housewives.

I chose to focus on two groups of women (Coloured and Indian) from similar areas namely Athlone and Rylands respectively. I also tried to choose women who were

similar in terms of level of education. At the same time, it was impossible to ignore the fact that more Coloured than Indian women were formally employed outside the home and this is reflected in the sample. It was also impossible to ignore the socio-economic differences between Coloured and Indian women, as the latter were more in a position of advantage due to apartheid than the former. This is explored in appendix B). Rather than focussing too much on trying to get respondents that were as similar to each other as possible, I tried to focus on women who had an interest in gender, religion/culture and were willing to share their experiences in an open, honest way. This sample was not intended to be representative of the entire population. This means that the results cannot be generalized to all Coloured and Indian women.

3.3.1 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

My sample consisted of twelve women. Of these women six were Indian, Hindu women and six were Coloured, Christian women. The six Hindu women's ages ranged from 25 to 40 years and the average age was 35.5 years. The six Christian women's ages ranged from 36 to 50 years old and the average age was 44.1 years.

In terms of education, four of the Hindu women had completed matric and two had standard eight or below. Amongst the Christian women, two had completed matric and had obtained diplomas, two had completed matric and two had been to standard nine or below. Thus, the two groups of women in this sample were relatively similar in terms of education.

The two groups, however, differed in terms of occupation. Of the six Hindu women, four were housewives and two worked outside the home. One of the two was self employed and the other worked at a bank. Of the six Christian women, five worked

outside the home (as a teacher, data capturer, sales assistant, technical assistant and a book-keeper respectively) and one was a housewife. I suspect that a possible reason why relatively few Indian women are formally employed is because of cultural pressure to be a full-time wife and mother and because of higher socio-economic status.

All of the Hindu women were married and had an average of two children. Of the Christian women, four were married and two were divorced. These women also had an average of two children. As I was interested in investigating 'pollution' beliefs around menstruation as well as childbirth I did not feel that it was necessary or possible (due to time constraints) for me to select a sample of women who had just given birth. Most women in this sample had given birth to a child about two years or more before the interviews were conducted. Five of the six Hindu women lived in Rylands and one lived in Rondebosch. Four of the six Christian women lived in Crawford and the other two lived in Woodstock and Stellenbosch. Half the Hindu women were born in Cape Town and the other half were originally from other parts of the country like Johannesburg and Durban. In contrast, all the Christian women were born in the Western Cape.

In terms of religion all the Indian women described themselves as being Hindu. More specifically, one woman said that she was a Sai Baba devotee, two were Hare Krishna devotees and the rest were not members of any particular sect or group. All the Coloured women described themselves as being Christian. Three said they were Anglican, one was a Protestant, one was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church and one was a born-again Christian. Thus, although the women in this sample would

broadly describe themselves as either Hindu or Christian, there were many differences in terms of religious groups or sects to which these women were affiliated. So there were many differences within the Hindu and Christian sub-samples.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

A semi-structured interview schedule of in-depth, open-ended questions was seen as the most effective way of gathering the necessary information. The semi-structured nature of the interview gave me a rough guide of important questions to ask, but at the same time, allowed me the flexibility to probe new issues spontaneously as they came up during the interview. I was also able to ask questions or clarify issues that I felt I did not adequately understand. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed the participants to express their thoughts freely in their own words. I was able to compare the responses of different participants as they described.

Each interview was tape-recorded with the permission of the women. Although some women expressed nervousness at the thought of the presence of a tape recorder, I found that they relaxed and forgot about the tape recorder as the interview progressed.

I began the interviews by asking the participants questions on demographic information, for example, where they were born and their age, education and occupation. The first set of questions dealt with details of the participants' own birth. This was followed by asking about their pregnancies and childbirth. The questions about childbirth focussed on religious/cultural restrictions and attitudes towards 'pollution' after childbirth. The next few questions dealt with menarche, menstruation and attitudes towards menstruation and 'pollution'. Finally, I asked questions about

religion and tried to focus on the role of women in Christianity and Hinduism. Most of the questions were focussed on 'pollution' beliefs in religion and culture.

The interviews took place at the women's homes. Thus, they were in comfortable and familiar surroundings. The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the women. Most of the women who were formally employed were interviewed in the evening and most of the women who were housewives were interviewed during the day. The interviews were usually conducted when the women's husbands were not present. This allowed for privacy and one-on-one interaction between the researcher and participant. At times, however, interviews had to be momentarily suspended for participants to answer the telephone or to see to a crying child. The average length of the interviews was about ninety minutes.

Each interview was then partially transcribed by the researcher. This was time-consuming but allowed me to use direct quotations. As far as possible direct quotations are used. The data was analyzed by looking for recurring themes. The themes that were considered most relevant to my topic are discussed in detail in this report.

3.5 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

According to Babbie, the term validity 'refers to the extent to which an empirical measure adequately reflects the real meaning of the concept under consideration' (Babbie, 1983: 117). There are three types of validity that are especially relevant to qualitative research. These types are called descriptive validity, interpretive validity

and theoretical validity (Burke, 1997). Interpretive validity refers to accurately portraying the meaning attached by participants to what is being studied by the researcher. It also refers to the extent to which the participants' viewpoints, thoughts and feelings are accurately understood by the researcher (ibid.). I tried to ensure that my study had interpretive validity by asking participants whether what I understood was actually what they said during the interview. I also clarified issues and asked them if I had understood things clearly by contacting them telephonically after the interviews. Thus, an attempt was made to understand the participant's worlds from their perspectives and to accurately portray these perspectives. In qualitative research the researcher is the instrument and validity therefore hinges on the skill, competence and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork (Patton, 1990). I tried to be rigorous by focussing the questions on 'pollution' during menstruation and childbirth in the interview guide. Another way in which I tried to increase validity was by transcribing as accurately as possible and by recording meticulous notes after each interview.

Reliability refers to whether "a particular technique, applied repeatedly to the same object, would yield the same result each time" (Babbie, 1983). Seale (1999) distinguishes between internal reliability and external reliability. Internal reliability is the degree to which other researchers applying similar constructs would match the data in the same way as the original researchers. It is the degree to which other researchers would match given constructs to data. I tried to improve the internal reliability of this study by tape-recording interviews and by recording data mechanically. External reliability refers to the replicability of entire studies and asks, "would other researchers studying in the same settings generate the same findings?" I tried to improve the reliability of this study by using low-inference descriptors (Seale,

1990) or direct quotations rather than trying to infer what was actually meant. I also made use of 'cross-participant' research by checking the information given to me by one participant against that of another. Finally, I conducted four pilot interviews to assess which broad areas to focus on.

In order to improve reliability I tried to minimize interview bias by asking straightforward questions and tried to avoid asking leading questions. However, as was mentioned earlier it is not the aim of this study to yield results that are generalizable to the entire Hindu or Christian communities in the Western Cape. The researcher also does not try to be neutral, objective or aim for a result that would be similar had another researcher administered the questionnaire. Thus, it was not necessary to aim for findings that would be able to be generalized or for the findings to be 'reliable'.

3.6 REACTIVITY AND REFLEXIVITY

When conducting interviews with Hindu women I became aware that I was being perceived as an insider when women used phrases like "you know how it is with our people". Being perceived as an insider had many advantages. For example, these women felt that I could understand their points of view as we were from the same community. Being an 'insider' also had the disadvantage of taking certain meanings and issues for granted. In contrast, when I was interviewing Christian women I was perceived as an 'outsider'. This may have prevented women from revealing too much. In both cases the women reacted to me as they would to a younger person and they were enthusiastic to share their experiences with me. Since the interviews were

conducted in their homes I thought that the women felt of ease. It was hoped that reactivity would be minimized by conducting interviews at home.

The researcher is from an Indian background and is fairly familiar with Indian cultural practices. In order to prevent bias I asked the same set of questions to the Hindu and Christian women. I also asked whether there were any religious restrictions after childbirth rather than presuming that there were, for instance.

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CHAPTER FOUR: THE EXPERIENCES OF HINDU WOMEN

4.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTHERHOOD

When asked whether motherhood was important in Hinduism, all the women in this study said that motherhood was very important. However, they spoke about the social importance of motherhood in general rather than the role of motherhood in Hindu beliefs. Motherhood was seen as important in teaching 'Indian culture' to their children. One woman explains:

"You have to teach your children the tradition and the culture that you were brought up with and especially in this day and age, children must have culture otherwise you'll just be left. Our Indian culture is dying off slowly and you have to teach them that and it will take them a long way in life."

The mother, then is the main agent of socialization. It is she who passes on culture and tradition. It was also evident from my interviews that most of the women felt that women are born to be mothers. This assumption was so widespread that two women felt that a woman was not truly feminine - in the traditional sense - until she conceived. (McConville, 1987). This assumption is typified in this response:

"In all religions, being a mother is important, not just in Hinduism. We are females and God has catered for us to have children in all religions. If you don't have that experience I don't see what's the point of ...being a woman. Being a woman and then

experiencing childbirth, then you're a woman actually. You're not a woman, you're not complete – not until you've given birth.”

As this illustrates, only a woman who has given birth is truly regarded as feminine. Traditionally, a woman's 'natural function' was to have children and those who do not have children are thought of as abnormal, unnatural or deprived (Ryan, 1991). Another woman said that women who do not have children are very 'hard' since they have not been through the emotional experience of giving birth. Motherhood is idealized and put on a pedestal but unfortunately mothers are not given much financial and societal recognition (McConville: 1987, 96).

When asked what the central Hindu beliefs about having children were, most women said that they had to just accept that you have to have a child. Having children, they said, was expected and encouraged by family members. Not having children would mean that 'people will talk.' Motherhood was given a great deal of respect in this Hindu community and was something that society expected of a woman.

4.2 UNMARRIED WOMEN

When asked how unmarried women are seen in Hinduism, most of the women in this study expressed the view that times were changing and that it was acceptable to a woman to marry in her mid-twenties. Marriage at a later age was acceptable especially if the woman was pursuing a career or trying to educate herself. At the same time, all the women spoke about the social pressure an unmarried woman faces to get married and to settle down. Three of the women thought that if a woman was

not married by the age of twenty-two 'people will think there is something wrong with you' and 'society will have something to say'.¹ Examples of unmarried relatives who faced family pressure to get married were given. One woman also commented that the older a woman gets, the more difficult it is to find a partner. The societal pressure that a woman faces to get married could be related to the idea that marriage is one of the most important life cycle rituals (Boodhoo, 1993). Since marriage is regarded as 'auspicious' married women enjoy more prestige than unmarried women (Harlan and Courtright, 1995).

4.3 SEX OF THE CHILD

According to Walker (1993) the undervaluing of female infants is common to most cultures. The findings of my study certainly confirm this. There seems to be a preference for male children amongst Indian families. When asked how her husband's family would have reacted if her second child was a girl (her eldest was a girl) one woman said:

"No, they wouldn't have liked it at all. While I was courting my husband, my sister-in-law was pregnant She gave birth and my husband's brother's wife gave birth. My husband's sister's baby was a girl, then his brother's wife had a boy. When my sister-in-law from Cape Town was pregnant I was in Durban and P phoned to say that K (sister-in-law) has a baby girl. And the sister said '*biji gadheri avi*' ¹Actually they

¹ Literal translation: another female donkey. It's a derogatory way of describing a female.

prefer boys. If a boy is born they give out *pendas*² and if a girl is born they don't bother - and I get very annoyed. I say why can't you do the same for a girl?"

To the best of my knowledge, often when a boy is born *pendas*, a rich milk sweet is distributed to friends and family whereas if a girl is born either nothing or a less-expensive sweet is given. However, this practice is changing and sometimes the same sweets are given irrespective of the child's sex. From my own life experience I can say that generally the elderly prefer to have grandsons rather than granddaughters.

Another woman who had three daughters and was pregnant with her fourth child at the time of the interview explained that they had been trying for a boy. She also expressed her disappointment that her second child was a girl:

"Personally I like to have boys, but I wasn't really disappointed when the first child was a girl, but for the second one I was disappointed. I was hoping for a boy. For at least three months I didn't give her much attention. But that changed after watching her grow. It's nice to know the sex of the child during pregnancy. For the third one I was disappointed but I dealt with it during the pregnancy. Before society used to expect every family to have a male child. Nowadays it doesn't matter. But husbands like to have a son – someone to carry the name."

The idea that male children are preferred who 'carry the family name' is supported by Chalmers (1993) who examines traditional South African Indian customs surrounding birth. Studies done in India offer more detail. Jacobson (1989), for instance, argues

² Pendas are rich, milk sweets

that a woman's prime role is to be a mother to sons. Women who have borne sons have a higher status than women who have borne daughters as sons can bring a wife who will help with domestic labour. Daughters on the other hand have to marry and take a dowry with them. They are therefore a financial liability (Homans, 1982). If a son is born he will remain part of his natal family whereas if a daughter is born she will marry and belong to someone else's family (Jacobson, 1989).

The preference of male children has severe implications. In India male preference has been practiced by society to such an extent that the percentage of females to males over the last few decades has shown a marked decline (Sen and Sengupta: 1993 cited in Balakrishnan: 1994, 268). A gender difference in food allocation is a contributing factor to higher female mortality (Balakrishnan: 1994, 269). The widespread practice of dowry payment when females marry constitutes a drain on family resources and dowry is another reason for the high female infant mortality rate (Kishor, 1993). In India, son preference also leads to a great number of female fetuses being aborted. Amniocentesis is being increasingly used by pregnant women to determine the sex of an unborn child and if the child is female, abortion is likely (Stevens, 1999).

Besides a social and economic preference for male children, I believe that this preference is also rooted in religious beliefs. One woman, a member of the Hare Krishna movement explained that she believed it was good karma to have a son and bad karma to have a daughter because women are more sinful than men are. Male children are able to go to *gurukul*³ and study. Traditionally, *gurukuls* have been set up to teach boys Vedic scripture. There are no such facilities for girls.

³ a school where boys are taught the Hindu scriptures

Although there seemed to be strong social pressure to have sons, when the women in this study were asked whether they themselves wanted to have a son or daughter only two women said that they wanted to have sons. This could be because having a healthy child was seen as being more important than having a son. The women in this study were also more educated and exposed to western influence than the women in the study done by Kishore (1993) in India, for example.

4.4 PREGNANCY

In general, pregnancy is seen as a positive state in Hinduism. The expectant mother is often given a great deal of care and attention from family members. As could be expected, when the women in this study and their husbands had planned their pregnancies there was a great deal of joy and excitement. When pregnancies were not planned the women felt a sense of shock and then there was gradual acceptance. However, in general, it was found that pregnancy was seen as an important stage in life. About sixteen Hindu *samskaras* or sacraments of the *Grhya Sutra* (laws governing behaviour) relate to conception and pregnancy (Chalmers, 1993). Half the women in my study said that a *srimant* ceremony, a ceremony for the unborn child, was conducted during their first pregnancies. In the seventh month of pregnancy a fire ceremony or sacrifice (*havana*) was conducted and prayers were recited. The pregnant mothers were dressed up 'like a bride' in fine clothes and jewelry as she would be a mother for the first time. The purpose of this ritual, according to these women, was to celebrate the conception of their first child and to bless the child. Another purpose could be 'to ensure a perfect, whole child' (Chalmers, 1993). Pregnancy, then, is a

state to be celebrated. As will be explained later, it is only after childbirth that a woman is seen as 'polluted'.

4.4.1 DIETARY RESTRICTIONS DURING PREGNANCY

In a study of British and Indian women, Homans (1992) found that food restrictions in pregnancy were more applicable to the Asian women whose Ayurvedic system of medicine distinguishes between 'heating' and 'cooling' foods. Hot foods such as chili, garlic and ginger were avoided by Indian women in Homan's study. Contrary to this finding, all the Hindu women in my study did not observe any dietary restrictions during pregnancy. Rather, they emphasized the importance of eating 'healthy food' or food that was 'good for the baby'. This finding could be attributed to a more Western conception of what a healthy diet should consist of. The Indian community in South Africa has been directly affected by the processes of secularization, industrialization and westernization (Schoombee and Mantzaris, 1990). The women in my study clearly did not believe in the 'traditional' Ayurvedic diet of heating and cooling foods, which is possibly due to increased westernization and industrialization.

4.4.2 SEX DURING PREGNANCY

Four women in this study believed that it was all right to have sexual intercourse during pregnancy provided that they were declared medically fit to do so. However, of these four, two women felt that one should 'be careful in the first few months because anything can go wrong' and in the last few months because it was 'too uncomfortable.' Two women believed that it not necessary to have sex at all during

pregnancy. Of these, one woman felt that sex was too uncomfortable and that she did not need to express her affection for her husband in a sexual way. The other woman felt that it was dangerous to have sex during pregnancy because 'the baby bag gets damaged', the child could die or become disabled. These findings are somewhat consistent with that of Chalmers (1993) who argues that according to Hinduism intercourse is encouraged in the early months of pregnancy but frowned upon in later months.

4.5 'CLEANSING RITUALS' BEFORE CHILDBIRTH

All the women in this study said that a 'cleansing routine' was followed by the hospitals they went to before their babies were born. This routine consisted of the shaving of pubic hair and enemas. Most of the women said that they shaved themselves at home but they were shaved again at hospital. They emphasized the importance of 'being clean' to go to hospital. One woman believed that pubic hair would 'infect' the baby and therefore should be shaved. The women saw enemas as being necessary 'so that nothing is passed' during labour. Homans (1992) argues that 'pollution control' exists when pregnant women are admitted to hospital by the purging of the body through enemas and catheterisation, the cleansing of the body and the shaving of pubic hair.

4.6 CHILDBIRTH

Five of the six women in this study had natural births and one had a Caesarian. All five women who had given birth naturally reported having painful contractions, although the number of hours spent in labour differed. All six women gave birth at

hospitals. Five had to have episiotomies and one had an epidural. This is an indication of the 'medicalization of childbirth' (Humphreys, 1991). The medical profession views pregnancy and childbirth as pathological rather than natural processes (Rylko-Bauer, 1990). Childbirth is seen as something that needs to be 'managed' through technological and surgical means (ibid.). This view has a negative effect on the women concerned. For example, one woman in this study said that the epidural that she was administered caused her to have a swollen bladder and another complained about the severe contractions she had after receiving an epidural. Although all the women felt that they were treated very well by hospital staff, I would argue that in the case of Hindu women the 'medicalization of childbirth' combined with religious/cultural practices about 'childbirth pollution' has profound consequences for the way she views her body, as will be explained below.

4.6.1 BELIEFS ON 'POLLUTION' AND CLEANSING RITUALS

During the period immediately after giving birth the woman and her child are seen as 'physically and ritually unclean and must be cleansed and purified before engaging in normal contacts' (Chalmers, 1993). This state of uncleanness is called '*a-chooth*' in Hindi and '*a-sutumar*' in Tamil (Kuper, 1960). Studies done in India suggest that the mother and child are declared 'untouchable' after childbirth (Jeffrey et al, 1989 and Thompson, 1985). Childbirth pollution is the most severe pollution of all, far greater than menstruation or death (Jeffrey, 1989). The woman is seen as 'more polluting' during the first few days after childbirth. This requires the performance of what I call 'cleansing rituals'. One woman explains it thus:

“With us it’s our culture to stay in bed for ten days. After ten days you have a bath on the tenth day. They take tumeric paste and give you a bath from head to toe’ They burn charcoal and you stand with your legs over that by, over your private. Its called *hek*. Only then can you come out of your room but you can’t come out of the house. After forty days you can come out of the house. Ja, for the first ten days you are not clean at all.”

This state of being ‘not clean’ requires rituals in order to cleanse and purify the woman. The ritual bath and walking over charcoal ‘clean’ the woman. Another woman describes how she had to be cleansed with a ‘leaf bath’:

“They give you a leaf bath and do a prayer before you enter the home. Before you enter the home they burn camphor. Then they bath you with leaves that heal you. They cleanse you because you are still in a contaminated state. You not clean when you in hospital, you can’t have a proper bath so they feel like when you come home they give you this leaf bath and cleanse you from top to bottom. They massage your head, ears, eyes. And after you have a bath you have like *samrani*. You have to walk over it three times. This is to heal your wounds.”

The first ten days after childbirth are seen as most ‘polluting’. After a period of forty days the new mother is given a ritual bath and can resume her daily activities (Chalmers, 1993). Rituals like the leaf bath, I would argue, have the effect of making a woman feel that her body and its functions are unclean.

4.6.2 RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS AFTER CHILDBIRTH

Not only is the woman in a 'contaminated state' after childbirth but she is religiously or culturally prevented from performing certain activities due to this 'unclean state'.

In Hinduism menstruation is thought to purify a woman's body because excess blood is released but the process of menstruation itself is considered polluting (Young, 1999). *The Law of Manu*, a Hindu religious scripture states that a menstruating woman 'is not permitted to perform religious worship or devotion; she must remain secluded from other members of her family during this time, in a special corner or section of the household, must not touch or play with children; cook, bathe or change her clothing or wear jewelry (Young, 1999) The form of worship that is common to all Hindus regardless of sect is the lighting of the lamp in the home. Menstruating women and women who have given birth do not perform this activity.

When asked if there was anything religious they were not allowed to do after childbirth all the Hindu women in this study said that they were not allowed to light the lamp and pray before the shrine in their homes, cook or go to temple for a period of forty days. According to one woman:

'You're not allowed to light the lamp, cook or do anything on the stove. After ten days you can go out to see your family. You can go out after forty days because the child is big enough to handle cold temperature'

After a period of forty days the woman can go to public places and attend prayers or other social gatherings. The following extract describes how a woman felt that she was unclean after childbirth and therefore could not light the lamp.

SL: and did you light the lamp in your house?

MP: In our own house we did but I didn't do it myself because you know you not clean and you can't go to the altar when you not clean. So my husband did it. This is also the reason for not going to the temple.

SL: and how did this make you feel?

MP: I was okay with it because when you're brought up you're so conditioned when you have your menstrual cycle you're not supposed to go into the temple, you're not supposed to light the lamp. We know that our bodies are not clean and we're not supposed to go to the temple or light the lamp.

Almost all the women shared the belief about 'our bodies are not clean'. This belief and the consequent belief that menstruating women should not enter a temple are so taken for granted that it is rarely questioned. One woman explains that she would not even go to a religious function after childbirth:

"I wouldn't even go to a religious function after birth. But there was nothing happening [after the birth]. During menstruation you can't go to light the lamp or to the temple. But obviously if there was something religious happening from my own religious point of view I would not have gone. You feel not clean. We've been brought up that way – during that time you don't light the lamp or go to the temple."

4.6.3 CARE RECEIVED AFTER CHILDBIRTH

As is the custom, five of the six women that were interviewed said that they went to their natal homes for the last month of pregnancy and the delivery of the child. The

new mother is expected to take care of herself and is urged to avoid strenuous work and cold water after giving birth. In most cases, the woman's mother would do the cooking and look after her. It was emphasized that extreme care should be taken after childbirth 'to avoid problems later on in life'. A special drink made with *soova* seeds and water was given as a substitute for tap water and spicy or gassy foods were avoided. In spite of 'being looked after' a woman who has just given birth is seen as being 'polluted'.

4.6.4 COOKING

Because most of the women in this study went home or had their mothers living with them, as is the custom, they did not do the cooking themselves immediately after giving birth. Some women had various family members besides their mothers to cook. This allows the new mother to rest and take care of her newborn. At the same time, however, women should not cook because of their contaminated state:

"No, I never used to go to the kitchen. In fact we're not allowed to touch the stove. My husband used to do everything for me. He used to make the tea, warm the food et cet era. According to the religion if you have a baby and you touch the stove the elderly people that come to your house won't eat food in your house. It's because of the childbirth. They say you are not clean 'til your menstruation is over."

It is also interesting that one woman said that she was not allowed to eat with 'the men' and other family members because she was 'not clean'. Rather than sitting at the table food was taken to her room. This, I believe, makes the woman feel isolated and impure.

4.6.5 'DIRTY HAIR'

Not only is the mother in a state of religious impurity after birth but the baby is also impure due to its contact with her body while it was in the womb. Chalmers (1993) argues that removing the child's hair is symbolically removes any pollution that adheres to the child in uterine life. One woman in this study said that the hair the child was born with is called 'dirty hair which you have to get rid of'. Another explained that the mother and the newborn are regarded as '*chuth*' – a state of being unclean until the hair of the child is shaved off:

"In our Hindu religion we call this *chuth* because we are dirty, because the baby is born with the hair, the hair is the main thing. After we remove the hair we say it's clean, like the baby is clean. Until we don't remove the hair of the baby we cannot do any spiritual prayers. Because the baby is carrying the hair of the birth that is why we remove the hair. After that we can go for prayers, functions and to temple."

At this point I would argue that beliefs about 'pollution' after childbirth cannot be seen in isolation. Rather, they are part of beliefs surrounding menstruation. It is to this area that I now turn my attention.

4.7 MENARCHE

In Hindu families a girl who attains menarche is given special status and often religious functions are held to announce puberty (Chaturvedi and Chandra, 1991). At

the same time a menstruating woman is considered unholy or impure (ibid.). Among people of South Indian origin there is a special puberty ceremony for girls (Kuper, 1960). In my sample, five of the women were of North Indian origin and one was of South Indian origin. The extract below describes the South Indian woman's experience of her first period:

"My first period was scary. I cried a lot. According to the Tamil way you are not supposed to see your father or brothers and they were present so I had to go to the neighbours. They keep you in your bedroom for seven days. You don't see any males...boys. When my mother came home I had to tell her. When you have it the first time you're like all lost. When my mother came from work she explained why you menstruate and how you must carry out yourself and how clean you must be. From small they teach you all these things. For seven days you not allowed to watch TV. Your aunties bring sweet oil, eggs and things you like to eat. You get a lot of gifts. Each day a different relative of yours feeds and baths you. You must stay in your room, you not allowed to go out or look outside your window (...) During the seven days you not allowed to see boys or men. They're not supposed to know. You're allowed to take a bath when there are no men in the house. The room has to be dark and clean. When you're menstruating you become contaminated so everything in the room after that you have to destroy. The clothes you use as well you have to be destroyed. After seven days they introduce you to the public. They dress you up like a bride. You must go to the priest and tell him the time you started menstruating (...)"

This extract illustrates how menarche is something that is celebrated. Kuper (1960) writes that on the last day of seclusion the girl is dressed like a bride and receives

clothing, jewels and food from paternal and maternal relatives. Even during the seven days of seclusion the young woman gets gifts and things she likes to eat. On the other hand, menstruation is seen as 'contaminating'. It is something that is so dirty that even one's clothes should be destroyed. Menstruation, as this extract describes, is something that should be 'hidden'. This menstruation etiquette' (Laws, 1990) prevents women from drawing men's attention to menstruation in any way. Laws (1990) argues that women are supposed to menstruate without men knowing. Men are the public' and menstruation is something that has to be 'kept silent' or hidden'. The woman mentioned above, said that she was given a bath by different relatives and that her aunts brought her sweet oil and eggs. In this way, menstruation is a 'female ritual'. Lee and Sasser Coen (1996) argue that menarche remains an obscure topic even though it is a critical juncture between childhood and adulthood. This certainly seems to be the case where my study is concerned, but this will be explored in more detail below.

4.8 MENSTRUATION

When asked whether menstruation was talked about in their families, four of the six women in this study said that menstruation was not talked about. This silence about menstruation led to feelings of fear and shock at the onset of menarche. One woman, for example, thought that she thought she 'got hurt'. In addition, when asked whether sexual intercourse was spoken about, it was found that sex was also a taboo topic in the families of over half the women.

4.9 RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES DURING MENSTRUATION

While menarche is considered auspicious a menstruating woman is considered impure and is not allowed to participate in any social function (Chaturvedi and Chandra, 1991). During menstruation a woman is considered 'polluting' (Thompson, 1985). A menstruating woman should not enter the kitchen or cook food for others and sexual intercourse between husband and wife is generally avoided (ibid). During menstruation, women are excluded from taking part in important rituals such as marriage and funerals and may not worship the gods (Thompson, 1985). In this way she enjoys a break from her daily activities (Chaturvedi and Chandra, 1991: 349). In the case of South African Indian women, I don't think that it is always possible for menstruating women not to cook. However, when asked whether there was anything religious that they were not allowed to do during menstruation, all the women in my sample mentioned that they could not light the lamp and pray at the shrine in their homes and they could not go to the temple. Furthermore, 'cleansing rituals' were mentioned in order to 'clean' this state of contamination:

"During that time, you not allowed to go to the temple, light the lamp or do prayers by the *jhunda*⁴. It's like blood ... it's contaminated. You are contaminated. After that only, after your seven days or how long your period lasts you're supposed to wash your hair and have a bath before you pray".

⁴ flag that is hosted outside the homes of some Hindu people. It is also a site at which worship is carried out.

All the women mentioned the theme of 'cleansing' and as the next extract indicates some women think that they are 'dirty'. Consequently, it was thought that menstruating women should not be allowed into the temple. Also, the social practice of not allowing menstruating women to go to the temple was rarely questioned as the following extracts show:

VM: Yes, you are not supposed to light the lamp or put your foot in the temple. You should not take part in any ritual until after four days. Then you wash your hair. They say 'baal chori kare'⁵.

SL: and why is this?

VM: Because they say you are dirty. Um, God is very clean. They don't like women who are not very clean – I mean to their home of worship.

SL: what is your feeling about this?

VM: I think it's right. Ja, I think it should be like that. If we feel physically dirty how can we walk into a temple? So I don't think women should go.

"Somehow you just know that you can't perform any religious activities when you have your menstrual cycle because you see your parents not doing anything like your mom not taking part in any religious activities. You can't be nearby in the same room you have to be far back. You can't be part of the actual ceremony. I felt unclean. I felt that I have my menstrual period and I should not be there because I don't feel clean, especially in the first few days when there is a heavy flow. You just naturally won't want to be part of any religious ceremony."

⁵ to wash the hair

Menstruation for some women means not just a physical feeling of being unclean but restriction on everyday activities such as attending a function or praying at the lamp. As the above examples illustrate, these women considered themselves to be impure or 'polluted'. Consequently they felt that social 'rules' about not attending temple were justified. These ideas about 'pollution' were linked to the way these women felt about their menstrual blood.

4.10 'DIRTY BLOOD'

In a study of menstruation, Laws (1990) asked a group of men whether they saw menstrual blood as being like other blood e.g. like blood from a wound. In keeping with this idea I wanted to find out how Hindu women viewed their own menstrual blood and their attitudes towards their own menstrual blood. Of the six women that were interviewed, four saw menstrual blood as 'dirty' and described it in negative ways. When asked if menstrual blood was like other blood, these were some of the more negative responses:

"It's definitely not the same. With menstrual blood you have clots. If you compare it with blood from a cut I think blood from a cut is more cleaner than menstrual blood. If you cut yourself you would suck your finger, but you won't even think of doing that with menstrual blood! It's a cleansing thing, a cleansing process."

"No it's not because its darker in colour, it comes out in blotches and it even has a smell. I think it's *dirty* [my emphasis] probably because it comes out of the private

parts. So that's why people think it's dirty. Whereas the same blood will come out of a cut and people will think nothing of it. But that's my opinion."

"You are dirty because it's the whole months *dirty blood* coming out of your body. But if you cut yourself and bleed then it's not dirty." [my emphasis]

"No. I don't think it's like other blood. It's more *contaminated* than normal. That's how I feel about it. It's *not clean*. When you get a cut, it's clean." [my emphasis]

The above-mentioned words like 'dirty', 'contaminated' and 'not clean' show that menstruation is seen in a negative light. These findings are similar to those of Britton (1996) who argues that the negative words that women use to describe menstruation indicate shame and fear. These negative images, Britton argues, have an impact on how we construct ourselves as women. Menstruation is used to ascribe to femininity 'associations of physical uncleanness' (Pendergast, 1989, 86 cited in Luke, 1997, 29). For Hindu women then, femininity or being a woman includes the idea that their bodies are dirty or polluted. In my opinion, if Hindu women see menstruation as 'dirty' they must see their bodies as being inferior to those of men. If one is 'dirty' during menstruation then being a woman is not always a positive thing. This 'pollution' is something that should not be spoken about or seen by men (Laws, 1990).

4.11 SEX DURING MENSTRUATION

Sexual intercourse during menstruation is seen as 'dirty' or taboo by both men and women (Luke, 1997). Most of the women in this study disagreed with the concept of sexual intercourse during menstruation. The following is a typical response:

"I disagree with it because I don't feel it's clean because as I did tell you I feel the blood is like dirt and it's messy and if you have sex at that part of the month its going to be even more messy. Then it messes up the bed and it's not a nice feeling. It's not something I will agree with. It's not healthy."

This woman and almost all the others in my study considered sexual intercourse during menstruation to be polluting. This finding co-incides with that of Flint (1974, cited in du Toit, 1988) who found that three fourths of her Rajput subjects said that sex during menstruation should be avoided. Flint argues that the most frequent taboo during her subjects' menstrual cycle is that of no sexual intercourse. In contrast, one woman in my study found sex during menstruation to be exciting but her husband found it 'dirty':

"If there's nothing medically wrong with you then its fine. But from my husband's side he feels it's messy, it's dirty. Not dirty in the religious or spiritual way but just from the fact of messing yourself up. But from the female side it's also very exciting because some people are more sensitive during that time. We have sex during menstruation, if we want to bond at that time. If we want to have it we have it. We can't not bond because we are menstruating."

Many women feel highly aroused during or after their period because of the increased level of oestrogen in the body (Laws, 1990). Many men have anxieties about engaging in sexual activities during menstruation, but those who do not have a problem with it claim that it is the ultimate acceptance of woman's body and her functions (ibid).

4.12 DUTIES OF A HINDU WOMAN TOWARDS HER HUSBAND

The notion that a husband is a wife's god, the source of her salvation and the purpose of her life is widely held in Hinduism (Klostermaier, 1994). In the Manusmriti, women are advised to serve their husbands like a god and not to take any religious vow without her husband's permission (ibid.). Women are also seen as fickle and unstable and should, therefore, not be given independence. A woman is said to belong first to her father, then her brother and finally to her husband. At no stage of her life should she remain unprotected (ibid.).

In a traditional Hindu joint family a woman would not be given too much independence as she would always have her husband and mother-in-law keeping an eye on her. Within their homes, although married Hindu women carry out their daily worship at a shrine, most of their religious activities focus on the preparation and serving of food, the birth and survival of children, the pleasure of her husband and the comfort of the family (ibid.). In my study when asked about the duties of a Hindu woman towards her husband, only one woman made reference to 'serving' her husband, but others, for example, the working women, did their 'service' in more subtle ways. The notion of the woman as the servant, which is emphasized in the Hare Krsna faith, is expressed here:

“She is supposed to serve him. She becomes like a servant to him and she has to cook and clean. When he comes home from work his food must be ready. She’s not supposed to work according to that custom and tradition. She has to serve him and satisfy his every need. Nowadays they don’t do that. If the wife is working the husband has to do it himself. In Krsna Consciousness the standard is still there to serve him. And they say if you dress, you dress only for your husband. You don’t dress to attract anyone else.”

In this way, notions of a woman’s duties towards her husband are centred around performing the household chores, cooking and cleaning. One woman, a Sai Baba devotee, expressed knowledge that men and women share household tasks nowadays. However, she still felt responsible for these tasks since she was a housewife:

“Those days women were not allowed to work. They were supposed to be housewives – cook the food, wash the clothes, keep the house clean, see to the children, but today it’s not the same, today it’s equal – women are working. When husband and wife come from work they both supposed to do the work equally. Not that the man must come home, take the paper, relax and watch TV. In my home I do all the work. I do the cooking, I do everything so when my husband comes home everything is done for him.”

The rest of the women in this study expressed a different view – that housework should be shared equally and a relationship based on equality should exist between

husband and wife. It is interesting that the women who expressed this view were either employed outside the home or had worked outside the home in the past:

“It must be fifty-fifty. There’s no such thing as she must be committed to him hand and foot. We must help each other because today we are living in a modern society.”

“What are the duties of a Hindu woman? Besides being subservient all the time?!(laughs). From my point of view if you’re a working person or okay, even if you’re not a working person, I feel if you’re working at home you’re doing the same amount of work as a person doing a nine-to-five job. To run a home is not that easy. But our Indian males don’t think that way. They think you’re sitting around watching TV.(...) We should share a lot of the work, but I still think we tend to spoil our husbands, like we make sure their food is on the table. ”

Attitudes about equality between the husband and wife show that Hindu women are changing their beliefs about ‘serving the husband’. As more woman work outside the home there is a need for both spouses to perform household tasks.

4.13 RELIGION/CULTURE AND FEMININITY

Being a Hindu woman would mean different things to different Hindu women depending on factors like class or education level. However, for the women in this study being a Hindu woman often means being given contradictory messages. For instance, menarche is to be celebrated but at the same time one is ‘impure’ or one is taken care of after childbirth but is ‘polluted’ at the same time. Femininity then, is

inextricably linked to 'notions of pollution'. These beliefs on pollution are based on religion and are transmitted as part of culture. If a woman is regarded as 'unclean' after childbirth or during menstruation and if these beliefs are rooted in religion/culture, then this has direct implications on the way she views herself. Furthermore, societal beliefs (for example that a married woman should have children) and values have a powerful influence in shaping the lives of women.

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CHAPTER FIVE: THE EXPERIENCES OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN

5.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTHERHOOD IN CHRISTIANITY

The women in this study considered motherhood to be important in Christianity for various reasons. Firstly, from a religious perspective, motherhood is linked to images of the Virgin Mary and mothers are considered to be important in religious and social life. One woman summarizes it thus:

“The mother figure comes from Mary the mother of God where she accepted motherhood without any question and she devoted her life to the child and that’s our example of motherhood. It is very important. A mother plays a big role and even socially. We’ve been to townships before coming here – in Manenburg and you can see how the mothers in the community play a major role not only in spiritual life but in day-to-day life. Where if those mothers if they say “we will not tolerate gangsterism”, they will mobilize their children. At the moment they are the ones who are supporting their children. The males are not very dominant. Motherhood is important not just in Christianity, but it plays a major role socially.”

The Virgin Mary is the embodiment of ‘all that is traditionally thought of as feminine and appropriate to motherhood: she is soft, yielding, merciful, tolerant and receptive’ (McConville, 1987). Some feminists (McConville, 1987) argue that the fact that Christ could only be born of a virgin is indicative of male disgust for woman’s sexual nature and the physical realities of motherhood. The Virgin Mary is revered for what

other mothers have lost – their virginity. On the other hand, Mary could be seen as a symbolic enhancement of female power. She was a champion to the poor, oppressed and ill and was a mother of the poor and homeless (Callahan, 1993).

Motherhood was linked to Christianity as children were seen as a blessing. According to one woman ‘any Christian priest will tell you that you should go out there and have children’ and according to another woman ‘God wants us to multiply and have families’.

Secondly, motherhood was seen as being a ‘natural’ instinct that women have. Consequently, those women who choose not to have children are seen as ‘the extreme’ as these two women explain:

“Motherhood is important in Christianity. A lot of women have the urge to be a mother; it’s just there. It’s made to be important that children are the blessings and it’s often preached about. Being a mother is what a lot of women strive for. Women who do not want children are the extreme. They have no instinct. The instinct to have a child is there in every woman.”

“I think it’s a very natural, normal thing. I know of a lot of women who don’t want children. Why? I can’t tell you. I really don’t know or I’m not even interested because I don’t think it’s natural or maybe they’re just suppressing it. Motherhood is important because we are all children of God. It’s a very practical example – He cares and loves us as much as we should love our children and spouses.”

Having children is seen as the 'norm' and those who do not have children are believed to be suppressing this natural urge.

Thirdly, motherhood was seen as something important for personal reasons. One woman explains that:

“Die moeder is die steenpilaar. Alles wat met jou kinders gebeur kom na jou toe – and especially as a single mother. Ek neem aan as 'n kind seer kry, eerste wat hy roep, hy roep vir sy ma. Sy ma is alles in sy lewe.”

Finally, two women felt that motherhood was not the most important part of their identities as women. Rather, motherhood was one facet of their identities. Furthermore, one of these women believed that one does not have to be a child's biological mother in order to love children and that if a couple could not have children they should adopt.

5.2 SEX OF THE CHILD

When asked what their reaction was to the sex of their first child, most of the women in this study discussed both their own reaction and that of their families. All six women had given birth to girls. Of the six women that were interviewed half said that they were happy with the sex of their child. Reasons for being happy with the sex of their first borns included not wanting to have boys, the mothers not having sisters and just hoping for a healthy child. One woman explained that women prefer to have daughters and men prefer to have sons:

“Ek was baie bly. Al is dit ‘n meisiekind dis ‘n gesonde kind. Mans is meer vir seuns en vrouens meer vir dogtertjies maar ek dink wat die belangrikste ding is vir ‘n mens is dat dit gesonde is. And my husband was glad.”

The other half of the women said that although they were happy either their husbands or others were hoping for a boy.

“When I was pregnant my husband’s first reaction was ‘my son’ ...without a thought I don’t know in that way they are very sexist. But nearer to the time of the birth and when they were in the labour ward with you and they experience the trauma with you then there’s a change of heart. Then it can be anything as long as you’re going to be well and the baby’s going to be well.”

Besides the father hoping that the first child would be a boy, one woman felt that members of the father’s family had also hoped for a boy.

“I was very thrilled. Because I had no sisters I really wanted a baby girl. And my husband had no sisters. My husband was very happy but when he phoned his dad to say that he had a girl baby he said “but why!?” He said “ your first one must be a boy”. It’s an old tale. I know in the Indian community it’s very important for them to have sons. They really want males to carry the family names.”

5.3 UNMARRIED WOMEN

In general, the participants in this study viewed unmarried women in a very positive light. Half the participants said that unmarried women should not be looked down upon. One woman explains:

“They don’t look down on them. More in the Christian culture that doesn’t affect people at all. In the Indian religion as young as fifteen they can match up a partner. No, it’s not thought of in the Christian faith. There’s no pressure or demands made to anybody whether you’re fifteen or twenty or thirty to get married. It depends on the individual entirely. In that respect you can appreciate that because it’s of your own choice and you must feel that you are ready to make that commitment.”

According to this woman there is less pressure on young Christian women to get married than for young Hindu women, for example. Another woman explained that marriage used to be a major thing in the Christian community but that we have moved away from that and have become more supportive of single women. One woman also said that she saw unmarried women as a threat especially if they were attractive and that single women were often envied, as they were go-getters. Finally, one woman said that unmarried women ‘hope to marry but there is no pressing need to look for a man, have sex and get married’. Thus, the participants in this study found unmarried woman acceptable and felt that there was no pressure on women to get married by a certain age. As will be explained in the next chapter, this does not mean that Christian women do not face any pressure at all when it comes to marriage.

5.4 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE

Of the six participants that were interviewed, over half said that equality should exist between husband and wife in Christianity. It was emphasized that neither partner should be superior. According to one woman:

“There is no set relationship. It depends on the individual. You serve each other. One doesn’t have to be superior to the other. There’s no dominant character. One does not play a more dominant role than the other does. Eve was formed from Adam’s rib bone. She wasn’t formed from his head bone so that she could sit on his head. They were joined by the rib so they could move together side-by-side, not one ahead of another or behind or on top of the other so it’s an equal relationship. It’s a partnership.”

According to another woman:

“The wife should honour her husband and the husband should honour his wife. They should not bear grudges. If there is any conflict it should be resolved before bed. We should respect one another and love one another. But nobody is in charge. We are one.”

A marriage, according to these women, is based on equality and neither spouse is dominant. This view, I would argue, is based on the Christian belief that in marriage ‘equality of persons rather than respect for patriarchal authority is stressed’ (Cooke,

1993). Lawler (1993) argues that it is precisely because man and woman are equal that they marry and become one body (Genesis 2:24). All Christians have been admonished to give way to one another. A Christian wife is urged to give way to her husband “as to the lord”. (Eph. 5:22). In the same way that Christ is the head of the Church, the husband is the head of the wife” (Lawler, 1993). A Christian marriage emphasizes mutual subordination where spouses are required to give way to each other and neither partner is dominant (Lawler, 1993). A husband is not to treat his wife as a servant or child, but as an equal, for whom God has given him the responsibility to love, care for and protect (<http://www.harvest.org/church/tools/ffl/familv/body4.htm>). In my opinion, the biblical verses, which say that a husband is the head of his wife, could be misinterpreted and used to justify patriarchy. One could also argue that a wife’s ‘giving way to her husband’ stresses the ambivalent position of women in Christianity. Rather than making either argument, I wish to say that what is of importance here is how the women in this study saw themselves. All the women saw themselves as equal partners in their marriages. In addition, two women emphasized the importance of both partners having similar religious goals in order to have a happy marriage.

5.5 DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS’ OWN BIRTH

Almost three-quarters of the participants in this study said that they were born at home with the aid of a midwife. Most of these women said that their mothers would stay in bed for about seven days and would be taken care of by family members. I would argue, however, that class factors play a role in how many days of bed-rest a

woman has. One woman, who was born in a hospital, had vivid memories of how her siblings were born at home:

“I was one of ten children. The younger children were born at home. When my brother was born I remember helping with the washing of the umbilical cord and it dropped off. So it was common to have children born in the house. It was part of growing up in the households of the day. We lived in an extended family with my grandmother, aunts and uncles. It was such a normal part of everyday life that we would stand outside and wait quietly for the baby to be born. My mom got up virtually right there. She was a factory worker. She got up soon and was very active. Mothers in our Christian community would have been up and about, eating with the family and sitting at the table. She went to church as soon as possible. We were raised into churchgoing as soon as possible.”

According to this participant, her mother was active soon after giving birth as she was a factory-worker and would not be able to get off from work. She also goes on to explain that her grandmother was a primary caregiver in her household. In the case of women who were working it was not possible to stay in bed for long periods of time after giving birth. One woman whose mother was a housewife explains that:

“For the first three to seven days she [her mother] stayed in bed. She was confined to bed for seven days at least. They had to wait for the baby’s navel to come out before they ventured out. Now that trend has faded out. You get up in hospital, bath and come home. You organize a maid to assist you if there is no one. In my mothers time

there were many more housewives around to assist you. But not in our day and age. You either call in help or your mom helps you, otherwise you get up and go.”

Thus, if one cannot afford to call in help, a woman who has just given birth has to ‘just get up and go’. Two participants mentioned that their mothers were ‘not allowed to wash their hair for seven days’. These participants could not explain why hair should not be washed or where these beliefs originated from but one woman guessed that ‘they came from society’.

Of the women who said they were delivered at home, all said that only their mothers, the midwife and perhaps a female relative (such as a grandmother) was present. One woman explained that ‘at that time husbands didn’t even venture into the bedroom at the time. If the midwife needed assistance then he would go in’. In this way, birth was a natural event that took place in the confines of the home, which was a familiar environment. Female relatives were present to assist and give support. Female relatives also helped with the cooking after birth. Women stayed in bed for a period of seven to ten days because ‘your body goes through trauma and you have to give it time to recover’. The fact that women seldom cooked directly after giving birth and had a rest for about a week is, as these women describe, not related to religious or cultural beliefs on ‘pollution’ but rather to the belief that the body needs to recover after giving birth.

5.6 PREGNANCY

Half the women in this study had planned to have a baby and were consequently 'excited' and 'thrilled' to hear they were pregnant. The other half, on the other hand, were either not on contraceptives or did not plan to have a baby and were 'surprised' and 'overwhelmed'.

All the women did not perform prayers during pregnancy on a ritual level, but rather on a personal level. No prayers or rituals were compulsory during pregnancy. Most women prayed for the child to be 'healthy and normal', to 'raise the child in His name' and tried to attend church regularly. It was also felt that pregnancy makes one more spiritual as 'anything can happen'.

None of the women observed any dietary restrictions during pregnancy. Two women emphasized the importance of eating healthy food like fruit and one woman said that she gave up smoking during her pregnancy.

5.6.1 SEX DURING PREGNANCY

Of the six women that were interviewed, all said that that sexual intercourse during pregnancy was acceptable and that they had had sex during pregnancy. One of the reasons why women had sex during pregnancy was related to fear of losing their husbands. One woman explains that:

“We were intimate until the ninth month (...) I did not believe in old wives tales saying it was taboo. There are no constraints about sex in the Christian faith although some might believe otherwise. I have a very caring partner. I was a little concerned about sex during pregnancy so I spoke to a friend about it and she said ‘look, you want to lose your husband?’ That’s probably one of the reasons why men would drift from a marriage.”

The woman above was a *prima gravida* (woman giving birth for the first time) and did not need stitches after the birth. She believed that the sexual intimacy during her pregnancy facilitated an easy birth. This woman was not alone in her fear of losing her husband. Another woman felt that her husband ‘would have a fit’ if they did not have sex during pregnancy so they had sex throughout her pregnancy.

Two women felt that ‘it was fine’ to have sex during pregnancy as long as there were no medical problems or no pain or bleeding was experienced. Two women said that there should be restrictions on sexual intercourse. The first woman said that she had stopped being sexually active after the sixth month because ‘the seventh month is critical and you can abort’. The second woman was not sexually active in the first few months of pregnancy because ‘you know there’s something alive inside of you and something might happen to the child’.

Since all the women that were interviewed said that sex during pregnancy was acceptable, I would argue that many beliefs on sexuality are shaped by religion and culture. For instance, in Christianity, sexuality is, to a large extent, seen in a positive light. According to the Old Testament, God wills all his creatures to be fruitful and

multiply (Jones, 1978). Marriage is a relationship, which meets the needs of sexual fulfillment, procreation and mutual love and understanding (ibid.). The traditional treatment of sex posited that sex was good because it produced children, helped alleviate temptation to sin (nonmarital sex) and, according to Saint Augustine, functioned as a symbol of the unity between Christ and the church (Gudorf, 1992). Thus, sex within the context of marriage, is not 'sinful' or 'wrong'.

5.7 CHILDBIRTH

All six women in my sample had given birth in a hospital and were attended to by doctors and nurses. One woman had a Caesarian and the rest mentioned the use of gas, forceps, epidurals, vacuum delivery and episiotomies. These procedures are indicative of the extent to which childbirth has become a medical rather than a natural event. Birth is made to appear to be a mechanical process in need of medical personnel to 'manage' it (Davis-Floyd, 1990). Some of the consequences of the medicalization of childbirth are feelings of inadequacy, embarrassment and a loss of control on the part of the women in labour (ibid.). During the labour, women are placed in the lithotomy position and are fully exposed. One woman describes her embarrassment the day after the birth:

"I felt terrible the following day and I couldn't look at the doctor. So I didn't look at him. He asked 'why are you talking to me but not looking at me?! So I asked him 'do you expect me to look at you, look you in the eye after what happened yesterday?' He said ' Mrs. H., it's a normal, natural thing. You know I don't even recognize your face or remember your name. I delivered your baby. You were my patient and that's all I

recall so you don't have to worry and you don't have to be shy'. He said ' I'll give you time and I'll come back."

In this case the woman felt embarrassed the next day and the doctor reassured her that she was just a 'patient' and that he did not even remember her face or name. Another woman described how inadequate she felt when she realized that she could not give birth normally as a woman lying next to her could and would have to have a Caesar:

"They connected me to a machine with a drip. *My ysbene kon nie normaal oorgegaan het nie dat sy kom deur. Terwyl ek daar le het ek gekyk hoe 'n ander vroujie geboorte gee 'n jong meisiekind – binne 'n bestek van 'n half uur. Ek het gevra 'maar hoekom kan ek geboorte gee as sy nie' maar sy was maar baie jonger as ek. Ek was op daardie stadium dertig. Ek het realize dat ek kan nie normaal birth kan gee nie . Ek het 'n Keisersnit gehad en toe word ek wakker en dis 'n dogtertjie.*"

As the examples above illustrate, childbirth is not seen as a natural event and the use of medical intervention often leads to feelings of embarrassment or failure on the part of the women concerned.

5.7.1 CLEANSING RITUALS BEFORE CHILDBIRTH

All six women in this study reported that they were given enemas and either had to shave their pubic hair at home or were shaved at hospital. Two women spoke about the importance of good personal hygiene. One woman explained:

“Funny enough, personally I like to keep myself clean. It was actually a good thing I shaved myself. My husband had to help me. I was prepared in that way. Before the birth they check that you are clean enough.”

Hair then becomes equated with ‘dirty’ while shaved hair is seen as ‘clean’. Women are encouraged to be as ‘clean’ as possible before birth. The extensive use of enemas and shaving supports Kirkham’s (1983, 45 cited in Brookes, 1991) view that the midwife, through routinized care, strips “the patient of her next of kin, her clothes, her pubic hair and the contents of her bowel.”

5.7.2 CARE RECEIVED AFTER CHILDBIRTH

Of the six participants that were interviewed, five remained in their marital homes after giving birth. Of these, three women had to cook themselves, clean and take care of themselves. At times, however, their mothers would come to stay with them and assist with chores or take care of the baby. Two women had their mothers-in-law or members of their husband’s family to take care of them. One woman went to her parent’s home so that they could take care of her.

5.8 RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS AFTER CHILDBIRTH

When asked if there was any religious/cultural thing that they were not allowed to do after childbirth, all the participants in this study said that there was nothing they were not allowed to do. Half the women emphasized that one could go to church as soon as one was physically well enough to do so and that ‘the sooner you get your child into

the home of God, the better'. Those women who had their mothers or mothers-in-law present after birth did not cook for about seven days. This gave them a chance to recover from the birth and to take care of the baby. Those women who did not have anyone to take care of them did the cooking by themselves after giving birth. Thus, there were no religious or cultural restrictions on attending church or cooking after giving birth.

5.9 BAPTISM

A possible reason for women being allowed to attend church as soon as they felt fit enough to do so could be related to the belief that a child should be baptized as soon as possible. Gallagher (1984) argues that the Church encourages families to have their children baptised as soon as possible after birth. This is because of Christ's teachings on the fundamental importance of baptism (ibid.) All the participants in this study had their children baptized. Two women mentioned having attended baptism classes in preparation for the baptism. It was generally felt that Godparents who could guide the child and who would serve as role models should be chosen. As far as possible, Godparents who attended church regularly and who, in the absence of the parents, were likely to raise the child in the Christian faith were chosen. All six participants described the sequence of events at a baptism in a similar way. The child is baptized in a church in the presence of a congregation. The child is taken up to a font and held by his or her parents. Water, which symbolized 'new life' and 'cleansing', was poured over the child's head by a priest and a prayer is said. The child is then officially given a name. The child is given a candle to symbolize 'coming from darkness to light'. The parents 'pledge to be responsible for the child and raise him in God's name'. A belief

that underlies the baptism ceremony is that *‘n mens is in sonde gebore en ontvang.’* In other words, we are ‘born into a sinful world’ and in that sinful world we must allow our lives to be guided by God. There was also a view that ‘man is born by sin and baptism is to cleanse the child of sin’. One woman also expressed the belief that *‘dit is die dag dat jou kind se lewe in die boek geskryf word – die Here skryf die kind se naam in The Book of Life’.*

Baptism symbolizes the turning away from sin and the entry into new life in Jesus Christ (Bromiley, 1979). Jesus himself was baptized by St John the Baptist. Baptism is an enactment of renunciation and renewal and is also a pledge of commitment to continuation in the life of discipleship (Bromiley, 1979). The person being baptized receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (World Council of Churches, 1982). Through baptism Christians are brought into union with Christ and each other (ibid.). Baptism is thus a bond of unity. From the very beginning the Church has administered the sacrament of baptism to infants and this practice has been the subject of much debate. The practice of infant baptism is followed by the Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists and Presbyterians and those who do not practice infant baptism include Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons and Quakers. Baptism, for some Christians (e.g. Catholics), means the remission of both original and actual sin and the infusion of grace. According to this view, baptism should not be restricted to adults only (<http://www.catholic.com/answers/tracts/infant.htm>). Catholics assert that baptism is an obligatory sacrament that is necessary for salvation. Fundamentalists on the other hand believe that baptism is not necessary for salvation as the person has already been saved by accepting Jesus Christ as his personal saviour (<http://www.lumenverum.com/apologetics/baptism.htm>). Fundamentalists point out

that Jesus was only baptized at the age of thirty and therefore, baptism is not appropriate for children below 'the age of reason' (<http://www.catholic.com/answers/tracts/infant.htm>.)

5.10 MENARCHE

When asked to describe their experience of having their first period' half the women explained how menstruation was not something that was easily discussed. One woman described how she took the outside of the pad off and was left with the cotton wool, which she then used. She added that cotton wool sticks very easily. Her mother had told her that she had to use a pad but had not shown her how to use it. Another woman said that she could talk to her sister but not to her mother about menstruation. Menstruation was also discussed with female teachers at school.

Menstruation was also something to be embarrassed about. According to one woman:

"I was about thirteen when I started menstruating. It was a Saturday morning and I was polishing the floor. I had this strange feeling and went to the bathroom. My mother said it was to be expected. Certain changes have to take place in order to have children. She explained the hygiene part. She gave me a sanitary towel and said 'now you have to take a walk to the pharmacy and buy yourself some. Oh, I was so embarrassed because I was so conscious that everybody's going to see! And ag, it was just a first step."

Besides a feeling of embarrassment two women spoke about how their mothers taught them about hygiene at the onset of menstruation. Menstruation, then, was linked to ideas about what was 'clean' and what was 'dirty'.

5.11 MENSTRUATION

When asked if menstruation was something that was talked about in their families, four of the six participants said that menstruation was not talked about. This finding is similar to that of Laws (1990) who argues that menstruation is something that has to be 'kept silent' or is 'hidden'. In addition, when asked whether sexual intercourse was spoken about, five of the six women said that sex was never spoken about in their homes. Most women felt that their parents were 'too strict' or 'too conservative'. Menstruation and sex, then, were seen as taboo topics of conversation.

5.11.1 RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS DURING MENSTRUATION

When asked if there was anything religious they were not allowed to do during menstruation all the women said that there were no religious restrictions placed on them during menstruation. A possible reason for lack of religious restrictions in Christianity could be related to Judaism (Frank, 1993).

Judaism had clear regulations concerning menstruation. According to Levitical Law a menstruating woman was in a state of impurity for seven days. Menstruating women were also distanced from the synagogue and were forbidden from praying (Frank, 1993). Menstruating women were believed to have the ability to pass impurity to

1993). Menstruating women were believed to have the ability to pass impurity to other persons and objects (ibid.) Later on, Jesus rejected these taboos especially when he healed a menstruating woman who touched his robe. Jesus emphasized the importance of purity of character rather than physical states of purity and with the passing of time, religious restrictions on menstruating women fell away (Eilberg-Schwartz, 1990), but this will be explained in more detail in the next chapter.

At the same time however, Christianity did inherit some Jewish beliefs about women. For example, Timothy asserts that a menstruating woman should not approach the holy table to receive holy communion and should postpone baptism (Frank, 1993). In addition, not all Christian beliefs about menstruation are positive. For instance, many theologians believed that menstruation was a curse inflicted on women because of Eve's sin. Menstruation, therefore, came to be seen as 'The Curse' (ibid.).

5.11.2 MENSTRUAL BLOOD

When asked whether menstrual blood was like other blood half the women in this study felt that menstrual blood was different from other blood (like blood from a cut) but that it was not unclean. These women saw menstruation as a natural or normal process that was just part of life. As one woman explains:

"We are made so different to men. We have that built in facility when we need that blood its going to be used at a certain time, but what do you do with it in the meantime? That's why we get rid of it. It's just a normal, natural thing. That's why you have got a womb to bear children. That's the difference between a man and a woman."

On the other hand, the other half of participants saw menstrual blood as being unclean and described menstruation in negative terms. According to one participant:

“There’s a big difference between the two [menstrual blood and blood from a cut]. First of all it doesn’t smell nice. It has an odor. It’s very dark at first and then it gets lighter. It *looks* dirty to me. It’s like you want to wash and wash especially during the summer, but it’s part of life.”

The other women saw menstrual blood as being unclean because it was ‘waste blood’ and because ‘it cleans your body’. These findings are similar to those of Britton (1996) who found that women used words like ‘yucky’, ‘dirty’ and ‘mess’ to describe menstruation.

5.11.3 SEXUAL INTERCOURSE DURING MENSTRUATION

All six women in this study said that they would not have sex during menstruation. Words like ‘dirty’, ‘messy’ and ‘gross’ were used to describe sex during menstruation. According to these two women:

“I think it’s gross! Definitely, no. No intercourse during menstruation. That’s a definite no. I think it’s dirty. I think it’s wrong. You should definitely abstain.”

“It depends on the individual. But it would be a bloody mess! If you want to take that chance then feel free if you’re comfortable with it. For me, I have a very heavy

menstrual cycle so for me it would be too much of a mess. I wouldn't be comfortable. If anyone else wants to, they can go ahead."

From these responses it is evident that these women saw themselves as 'polluting' during menstruation (Britton, 1996). Sexual intercourse was considered taboo by this group of women. Views on pollution may function to restrict a woman from having sex at times deemed appropriate to others (ibid.) The idea that sex during menstruation is unacceptable, I believe, is something that Christianity inherited from Judaism. According to the Old Testament, if a man and woman deliberately cohabited while a woman was menstruating, they were cut off in death (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1988). The prohibition of sex during menstruation probably arose to prevent the occurrence inflammation in the genital area and eurethritis (ibid.).

5.12 RELIGION/CULTURE AND FEMININITY

As the women in this study have indicated, in order for a wife to be 'feminine' she does not have to be subservient to her husband. A relationship of equality should exist between the spouses and this belief, according to the interviewees, is rooted in Christianity. A single Christian woman would also face little societal pressure to get married. Once married, however, she would be urged to have children, as they are 'blessings' and to raise the child as a Christian. The women in this study did not describe any religious restrictions after childbirth. In other words, they were not seen as too 'polluted' to cook or to attend church. This has positive implications for femininities, as they were less likely than Hindu women to view their bodies as 'contaminated'. However, half these women described menstrual blood as 'dirty'. In

Christianity menstruation was seen as 'a curse' that Eve had to suffer. On the other hand, women in Christianity are revered for being mothers just as Mary; the mother of Jesus was revered. This is indicative of the religious ambivalence that surrounds the way women are portrayed. Finally, femininity is linked to religion/culture because of religious beliefs, for instance, that a woman who has just given birth may enter a church, shape the way women see themselves.

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CHAPTER SIX: COMPARATIVE CHAPTER

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I have attempted to examine similarities and differences of the responses of the Hindu and Christian participants in my study, and where possible, I have tried to explain why there are differences in the responses. In keeping with the aims of structural-functional theories of menstrual taboos, I have examined the function of 'pollution beliefs'. Finally, I attempt to show how femininities are mediated by religion and culture. Before looking at religious restrictions during menstruation and childbirth, I have tried to place the study in its cultural context by analyzing issues like the status of unmarried women, the relationship between husband and wife and attitudes towards sex during pregnancy.

6.2 UNMARRIED WOMEN IN HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY

In my sample of six Hindu women, three felt that it was socially unacceptable for a woman to remain single. These women spoke about the social pressure to get married. For instance, one woman explained that:

"It's not a very good thing, especially in the Indian community. In India if you're about twenty or twenty-one and not married they think there is something wrong with you. Society will have something to say. My cousin was twenty-one and not married and everyone was worried. There was pressure from family and society."

These three women felt that people in society would talk about a woman who was unmarried by thirty and people would think there was something wrong with her. Two women felt that it was acceptable for a woman to marry late in her twenties, especially if she was studying and one woman felt that being single was 'not a problem'. This woman, who was a housewife, felt that it was better to remain single than to be forced into a marriage that was unhappy. She emphasized that marriage was up to the individual. Since this woman was not working outside the home or more highly educated than the rest of the women we cannot conclude that she was more 'modern' or 'liberated' than the rest. Rather, she was challenging cultural pressure to get married by using her own observations about life.

In Hinduism, according to the *Dharmasastras*, classical legal texts which portray an idealized pattern of the life cycle, males should pass through four distinct stages or *asramas*. As youths they should study and serve their teachers, as young men they should marry and support their family and community, in middle age they should retire from wordly life and engage in spiritual practices and in old age they should renounce the world and become ascetics (Harlan and Courtright, 1995). In a Hindu's life there are sixteen sacraments known as the *solah sanskaras* and marriage is one of these sacraments (Boodhoo, 1993). Boodhoo (1993, 42) argues that the wedding ceremony is the "most elaborate and cherished *sanskara* and is one of the surviving *sanskaras* in Hindu homes" (not all *sanskaras* are still practiced). The classical tradition formulates two basic roles for women: daughter and wife. According to various legal texts a woman should be married (Harlan and Courtright, 1995.). The *Manusmriti*, for example emphasizes that a woman should be guided by her father in childhood, her husband in her youth and her son in old age. Furthermore,

marriage for Hindu women connotes auspiciousness and fertility. The vermilion that married women wear in the paths of their hair or the red dot or *bindis* they wear on their forehead connote auspiciousness (Lindsey and Harlan, 1995). Unmarried women or widows do not wear these auspicious signs and are therefore 'less auspicious' than a married woman.

In contrast to the Hindu women, all six Christian women in my sample said it was socially acceptable for women to remain single and that there was no societal pressure to get married. As one woman explained:

"In Christianity single women and married women are all the same. We are all children of God and we cannot be seen differently. Unmarried women are not looked down upon."

A possible reason for this difference, I would argue, relates to the purpose of marriage. Jesus in Matthew 19:9-12 and Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 portray "singleness as acceptable, normal and honourable way of life." (Partridge, 1982 cited in Kimanthi, 1994) In Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1: 7) Paul argues that "marriage is not necessarily a matter of course". Both marriage and singleness are gifts of God to His children. According to Paul, singleness can be used to glorify God. For example, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel used her singleness after her husband died to devote her life to prayer (Luke 2:36-37). According to the women in my sample, being single was religiously and socially acceptable. This could be because the sample of women had very liberal attitudes towards being single.

However, this does not necessarily mean that Christian women face an absence of societal pressure when it comes to marriage. In Christianity marriage is intended for companionship and friendship between spouses (Kimanthi, 1994). Marriage is also intended for procreation in order to maintain a population equilibrium. According to Genesis 2:21 (cited in Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1988) God created woman as a mate for man by using the man's rib as a base thereby making woman man's own flesh. God also pointed out that "that is why a man will leave his father and his mother and he must stick to his wife and they must become one flesh" (Mt 19:4, Ge 2:24, cited *ibid.*). Since woman was created as a mate for man and husband and wife are supposed to be 'one flesh', I would argue that an unmarried Christian woman could possibly feel incomplete without a spouse. Lawler (1993) asserts that man and woman together are named '*adam*'. They are complementary to one another and human creation is not complete until they stand together. Marriage is also regarded as a sacrament which is meant to give grace (Cooke, 1993). Thus, a Christian woman who is unmarried may feel that she is not receiving grace. The question of whether it is socially acceptable for women to remain single is shaped to a large extent by the participants' religion and culture. For the respondents in this study it was less acceptable for Hindus to remain single than it was in Christianity and this is reflected clearly in the participants' responses. The relationship between spouses is also, as I shall show in the next section, shaped by religion and culture.

6.3 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE

Regarding marriage, all the Christian women in this study emphasized that the relationship between husband and wife should be based on equality. All the Christian

women felt that husband and wife should honour and love each other. Neither spouse, they felt, should be dominant. One woman explained that since Eve was formed from Adam's rib bone a relationship of equality rather than dominance should exist. In this way, a partnership existed between both spouses. A Christian marriage requires both partners to give way mutually. Mutual giving way, mutual subordination and mutual obedience are stressed so that both partners can become one body (Lawler, 1993). Therefore, I would argue that in the case of these Christian women, femininity is linked to ideas of equality in marriage where neither spouse should try to dominate the other.

Although the women in this study emphasized that Christian marriages were based on equality between the spouses, we should be careful of concluding that Christianity holds a unified coherent perspective on the position of women within marriage or that Christianity is less patriarchal than Hinduism. On the contrary, I would argue that when it comes to marriage, Christianity is ambivalent about the position of women. For example Paul says "at the head of every man is Christ, the head of every woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God". Paul declared that a woman should keep her head covered as a sign of the subordinate status to which she had been subject since the beginning of creation because of the sin of Eve and her subordinate status to men. Because all women shared Eve's misfortune, it was believed that for a woman to have her head uncovered was like physically exposing a physical deformity (Parvey, 1974). However, in Gal 3.26-28 (cited in Schussler-Fiorenza, 1983), Paul says "for you are all children of God. For as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female for you are all one". Paul asserts that patriarchal marriage and

sexual relationships between male and female is no longer constitutive of the new community in Christ. He proclaims that in the Christian community all distinctions of race, class and gender are insignificant (Schussler Fiorenza, 1983). This, I would argue, is a direct contradiction – if there is equality between the sexes, why should the husband be the ‘head’ of the wife? To summarize then, the position of married women in Christianity is ambivalent. The women in this study, however, felt that their marital relationships were based on equality.

In contrast to the Christian women, the Hindu women in this study had a different idea of the kind of relationship that should exist between husband and wife. Only two Hindu women mentioned that there should be equality between the spouses. This could be explained in relation to what the women believed the roles of husband and wife to be. Five of the six Hindu women interviewed said that the woman should prepare the food or ‘make sure his food was on the table’ and ‘see to the children’. They saw the husband as being ‘the provider’. The husband’s duty was also to treat the wife well, look after her, respect her and ‘supply the money to buy the food’. In contrast, the Christian women saw the wife’s role as providing friendship and support in a marriage. Since many of the Christian women were formally employed, most felt that household tasks should be performed by both partners. Thus, in the case of the Hindu women interviewed, femininity was linked to very set gender-roles where domesticity and child-rearing were emphasized. A good wife was a woman who had the food ready when her husband came home and someone who took care of the children and a good husband was someone who was the provider and breadwinner. I also observed that the two Hindu women who believed that ‘a wife should serve her husband the way a servant serves a master’ were more religious than the rest in terms

of how many hours they spent praying and their knowledge of scripture. In the case of the Christian women interviewed, gender roles within marriage were more flexible.

6.4 SEXUAL INTERCOURSE DURING PREGNANCY

In general, the Christian women in my study expressed a more positive attitude to sex during pregnancy than the Hindu women. Amongst the Hindu women three felt that there was nothing wrong with having sex during pregnancy. Two women felt that it was not necessary to have sex during pregnancy. Interestingly enough, these two women were congregational members of the Hare Krishna movement, which holds that sexual intercourse is primarily for the purpose of procreation and that sex life, even in marriage, should be restricted. This position differs from the traditional Hindu belief that sexual intercourse in marriage is natural and acceptable. One woman said that one should not have sex during the first and last months of pregnancy. In contrast, all the Christian women said that they had sex during pregnancy. Most of the Christian women felt that unless a woman had a medical problem, it was acceptable and even desirable, to have sex during pregnancy. Two women said that they had sex with their husbands until the ninth month and one said that she had stopped being sexually active after the seventh month, as it was too uncomfortable.

A possible reason for the difference in attitudes towards sex during pregnancy between Christian and Hindu women stems from culture and religion. According to Chalmers (1993) in Hinduism intercourse is allowed and encouraged in the early months of pregnancy as it is thought that additional sperm can contribute to the baby's growth. Later on in the pregnancy, sex is frowned upon as it is said to generate

excessive 'heat' which would threaten the foetus's health. These cultural beliefs were reflected in the women's negative attitudes towards sex during pregnancy. In contrast, there are no religious or cultural restrictions on sex during pregnancy in Christianity.

6.5 REACTION TO THE SEX OF THE CHILD

Before conducting the interviews, I expected that more Hindu women than Christian women would prefer to have sons. This expectation was in keeping with the ideas expressed by Homans (1982) and Jacobson (1989) that women who have borne sons are accorded a higher status than women who have daughters. Of the Hindu women, only two wanted to have a boy baby. Two did not mind whether the child was a boy or a girl and two women wanted girls. One woman who had a son said that her husband was very excited to have a son because there was now someone to 'carry the family name' and one woman who had only daughters said that her husband would have preferred to have a son for the same reason. Of the Christian women, four said that they wanted girls and all four had given birth to daughters, one wanted a boy and one did not mind whether the child was a boy or a girl. Of the four women who had girl babies, three said that their husbands or members of their husbands' families were disappointed at the sex of the child. Thus, contrary to what I had expected, there was not a very clear preference for sons amongst the Hindu women in comparison to the Christian women. These findings contradict those of Homans (1982) and Jacobson (1989). A possible reason for this difference is that the Hindu women in my sample were living in an urban area and had access to a higher level of formal schooling than the women in Homans' and Jacobsons' studies. At the same time, both the Christian

and Hindu women expressed that there was a high societal expectation on them to bear sons.

6.6 MENARCHE

In general, when asked to describe their experience of having their first period, the onset of menarche was described as a negative experience for the Hindu women in my study. Phrases such as 'I was afraid to tell my mother', 'it was scary and I cried a lot', 'it wasn't a very good experience' 'it was very tough' and 'it was a shock' were used. Menstruation was not seen as a positive experience that marked a girl's transition to womanhood but was rather something that evoked fear and shock. Half the Hindu women in this study said that they told their sisters that they had started menstruating before telling anyone else. This was because they were either afraid to tell their mothers (since menstruation was not a topic that was spoken about easily) or because they felt that no one else was available to talk to. According to socialization theory, the relationship that a child forms with his or her parents and primarily with the mother, is the blueprint for all other relationships (de Wit and Booysen, 1995). Babies become social by mimicking their parent's facial expressions, movements and thereafter their entire behaviour patterns (ibid.). Consequently, when it comes to menstruation, one would expect a girl to turn to her mother for knowledge and advice. Since menstruation, however, was a taboo topic, other family members, or sisters, more specifically, acted as agents of socialization. A variety of forces operate to produce the total socialization experience of each individual (Clausen, 1968). Although the family has traditionally been one of the main socializing agencies of a child during infancy (Giddens, 1989) since menstruation is a sensitive topic, young

women cannot always turn to family members for information about menstruation. A female child seems to be 'rewarded' for keeping silent about menstruation (Clausen, 1968).

Like the Hindu women in my study, the Christian women also described their experience of having their first period in negative ways. Phrases like 'it was a total shock', 'I was not very comfortable with it' and 'I started crying' were used. It was interesting that most of these women said that their mothers did not talk to them in detail about menstruation. For instance, they were not told how to put on a sanitary pad or why menstruation occurred. One woman explained that although her mother told her about menstruation 'it was very basic. No details were given to me'. These findings support those of Britton (1996) who found that education from mothers about menstruation tends to be based on a biological perspective rather than experience. Mothers are more likely to advise their daughters about how to be prepared for and cope with the practical aspects of menstruation, but will not necessarily tell them how to deal with their feelings (ibid.) Consequently, half these women said that they spoke to female teachers at school about menstruation. A possible reason for them speaking to teachers could be that because their mothers were formally employed. Teachers were able to provide detailed information about menstruation. In this way, the school functioned as an agent of socialization where menstruation was concerned (Borgatta and Borgatta, 1976). Although schooling is a formal process where there is a definite curriculum of subjects being studied, schools also have the 'hidden curriculum' of socializing children (Ciddens, 1989).

When asked if menstruation was something that was talked about easily in their families over half of the Hindu and Christian women said that it was not a topic that was discussed easily. Sex seemed to be even more of a taboo topic of conversation as only two of the twelve women in this study felt that sex was a topic that was talked about easily. Menstruation and sex were shrouded in secrecy. These results confirm those of Luke (1997) who argues that menstruation is something that girls learn from an early age to keep secret, to dread, fear and hide. Houpert (cited in o'Grady) calls this silence on menstruation "our culture of concealment". If menstruation is mentioned at all, it is treated as a physiological nuisance to be hidden at all costs. Even media advertisements highlight concealment over everything else (ibid.). Similarly, Laws (1990) argues that the 'rules' of 'menstrual etiquette' state that women should not draw attention to menstruation in any way. Sanitary pads are portrayed to offer 'security' and 'protection' against visibility and staining from menstrual blood (Rosengraten, 2000) Women often buy sanitary towels with enormous discretion and carry their handbags to the toilet when they only need to carry a sanitary napkin (Greer, 1993).

These findings are also similar to those of Lee and Sasser-Coen (1996) who collected women's oral and written narratives about their bodily histories with 104 women using a form of retrospective in-depth interviewing. According to one woman that Lee and Sasser-Coen interviewed, there was a great deal of anxiety surrounding menarche. This woman was concerned that she would look or smell different and she did not want people to know that she was menstruating. She saw menstrual blood as 'icky'. The women in Lee and Sasser-Coens' study also described how they were socialized into the world of sanitary products and how they had to conceal menstruation from

other, usually male, family members. Thus, menarche was seen as an experience that invoked anxiety and fear. My results also seem to confirm those of Stoltzman (1986, cited in Lee and Sasser-Coen, 1996) who found that adolescent girls tended to get more information about menstruation from the media and their peers than their mothers. The women in my study spoke to their sisters or teachers about menstruation. Therefore, family members and the school served as socialization agents when it came to menstruation.

6.7 RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES DURING MENSTRUATION

When asked if there were any religious or cultural restrictions placed on them during menstruation, all the Hindu women in my study mentioned that they were not allowed to light the lamp in their homes, go to the temple or partake in any religious activities. Most women said that they took a ritual bath when their menstrual bleeding ceased – either the fourth or seventh day and washed their hair. It was only after this bath that they would light the lamp or go to the temple. Thus, menstruation was seen as something ‘dirty’ that needed to be cleansed. When I probed further to try to find out how these women felt about these restrictions, most felt that the restrictions were justified because they themselves feel ‘dirty’ and ‘contaminated.’ In the case of the Hindu women I would argue that menstrual taboos were directly related to religion and culture. In the Laws of Manu (1969), a menstruating woman becomes ritually pure by bathing after her secretion has ceased to flow (v66). Menstruation, in the Laws of Manu is not seen in a positive light. Rather it is something that needs renders

one unclean and in need of 'purification'. It is also stated (v78) 'if a man touches a menstruating woman or a woman in a childbed, he becomes pure again by bathing'.

The Christian women in this study, on the other hand, said that there were no restrictions placed on them during menstruation. However, this was not always the case. According to Levitical Law, a menstruating woman was considered impure for seven days and would contaminate anything she sat or lay on during that period. Anyone who had contact with her would have to bathe in water and was considered impure until evening. To end her state of impurity a menstruating woman would wait seven clean days and then offer two turtledoves and two pigeons to God (Eilberg Schwartz, 1990). These laws raised a series of contradictions and inconsistencies. For instance, in Judaism blood had different meanings depending on how it originates and where it is from. Circumcision coincided with the end of a boy's impurity caused by the mother's blood at birth. The entrance of a male into the covenant occurred with his transition from female blood to male blood. Circumcision was associated with wholeness and purity. In contrast, menstrual blood was equated with impurity. When a male produced semen he was unclean until the evening. Anything he touched also remained unclean until the evening. Even sexual intercourse between a husband and wife rendered him unclean until evening. A nonseminal discharge was nearly as contaminating as menstrual blood. A man with such a discharge contaminated everything he came into contact with and he remained unclean for seven days. This raises a few contradictions and questions namely: if the biblical priests authored the blessings of "be fruitful and multiply" why did these authors regard sexual fluids as impure? (Biale, 1997). The answer seems to be that such fluids were seen as divine substances whose very power created impurity when they left the body. It has been

suggested that fluids (like menstrual blood and semen) that pollute the body symbolize or allude to death. Those that do not have this connotation (like sweat and breast milk) are not contaminating (Eilberg Swartz, 1990). So, if certain bodily emissions are contaminating because they represent death, why is it that the end of the contamination is marked by the sacrificial death of an animal? Another question that can be raised is 'why is semen not as polluting as menstrual blood?' Eilberg Swartz argues that "the difference between menstrual blood and semen might also be part of the symbolic domination of women. Although the loss of menstrual blood represents a missed opportunity for procreation, menstrual blood is more contaminating simply because of its gender. Furthermore, in Leviticus, animal blood was used in sacrifices and was seen as a purifying agent whereas menstrual blood was seen as 'polluting' (Hanson, 1993).

Following the destruction of the temple in 70AD the laws of niddah or separation were strengthened by the rabbis. During the Talmudic period which spanned six centuries, for example, the period of a woman's separation during menstruation was increased from seven to twelve days. During the medieval period, additional prohibitions arose such as an interdiction against menstruating women entering a synagogue. The ancient Jews were not the only ones who had negative attitudes towards menstruation. Within the Graeco-Roman world in which the church developed, it was believed that contact with menstrual blood would 'turn wine sour, cause hives of bees to die and seeds in gardens to dry up' (Frank, 1993). Besides the influence of Jewish tradition and the Graeco-Roman environment, Christianity was also influenced by a cosmological factor. Oudermans and Lardinois (cited in Frank, 1993) distinguishes between 'separative cosmologies' and 'interconnected

cosmologies'. In 'interconnected cosmologies which operated in Judaism and the Graeco-Roman environment, entities and categories were intimately connected and there was no rigid separation of the natural and moral orders or between physical and moral transgressions. In such cultures, pollutions and taboos played an important role because it was believed that the whole cosmos could lose its balance to minor pollution. Expulsion of blood through childbirth and menstruation was an infringement of moral-physical boundaries and consequently regulations and taboos arose. Within the ancient world there was also the emergence of 'separative cosmology' based on the notion of separation of categories. Pollution was not thought to be able to spread from one category of the cosmos to another. The Christian Church of late antiquity found herself at the 'interface' between these two cosmologies. Rather than subscribing to one cosmology or the other, Frank (1993) argues that within the church there was a meeting, blending and conflicting of cosmologies which had a powerful influence on Christian attitudes towards female blood issues.

Judaism came to have less influence on Christianity as it developed into a gentile community, especially after the establishment of the Roman Empire (Frank, 1993). For the Israelite priests, contamination originated in processes over which a person exercised little or no control. This idea was rethought and challenged by the early Christians (Eilberg Schwartz, 1990). Increasingly, contamination could be controlled by human action and will. This process of linking contamination to controllability represented a symbolic reversal of the Israelite priestly system. Human action became a source of contamination. Contamination was a consequence of what one did, rather than a result of what happened to one's body. Pollution was no longer seen to be 'outside' one's body but as being 'inside' the body and impurity was seen as partially

subject to human control. During the 7th-5th centuries BCE most Jews had to contend with the priests' theory of contamination. Later on, (circa 170BCE-70CE) the Qumran community regarded the priesthood that was officiating in the temple during its time as illegitimate. New restrictions that indicated a different conception of impurity were introduced. Early rabbinic circles widened the rules of contamination and all Israelites were expected to cook and eat their food according to the rules of cultic purity (circa 200CE). The early Christians went further than any other group by repudiating the central premises of the priestly understanding of impurity.

During Jesus' lifetime the laws regarding ritual pollution were rigidly adhered to by the Pharisees (McGowan, 1994). As a group, women probably suffered most from the concept of uncleanness as they were regarded as unclean for at least two weeks of every month. However, Jesus rejected the code of ritual impurity emphatically. Jesus considered lust, blasphemy, theft and false witness, rather than bodily emissions, as things that really defiled a person (ibid.). According to Levitical law things that contaminated a person were: a corpse, skin disease, blood from the vagina, the birth of a child and seminal and non-seminal discharge from the penis. Impurity was seen as an intrinsic property of certain kinds of objects and was an actual property of the external world. In the early Christian community, impurity no longer originated in objects and was not considered 'out there'. This does not mean that Paul altogether rejected the concept of purity but now the sources of contamination were a person's action or conscience. The origin of impurity shifted from objects to the human will. The early Christians did not consider all kinds of things that came out of the body as polluting. For example, they did not regard the discharge of blood from the vagina as

polluting (Mark 5:25-34). They viewed impurity as a consequence of one's actions and decisions and therefore subject to human control (Eilberg Schwarz, 1990).

At the same time, however, Christianity never entirely lost its Jewish inheritance (Frank, 1993). For example, the Apostolic Constitutions (books 5, 27-30) holds the view that neither sexual relations nor childbearing nor menstrual flow can defile a person. Nevertheless, husbands should not have sexual relations with their wives when they are having their period 'out of regard to the children to be begotten'. Furthermore, medieval Catholicism made the stipulation that menstruating women were not to come into the church (Greer, 1993) but this stipulation gradually fell away.

From the above explanation, we see that with the passing of time, Christianity lost some of the taboos and menstrual restrictions of Judaism. It can be argued, however, that society still has a revulsion for menstruation and this is principally evinced in our efforts to keep it secret (Greer, 1993). Unlike Christianity, Hinduism seems to have retained taboos and restrictions surrounding menstruation. For instance, in the Laws of Manu, contact with a menstruating woman causes impurity. This view is still held today.

6.8 RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS AFTER CHILDBIRTH

When asked whether there were any religious or cultural restrictions placed on them after childbirth all the Hindu women's answers followed a similar pattern. The Hindu women explained how they stayed in bed for about ten days after birth. During these

ten days the women's mothers would generally do the cooking as most women returned to their natal homes before giving birth. After the tenth day, a ritual bath was taken. Thereafter the women did not 'leave the house' for a period of forty days. During the first forty days after giving birth, women are seen as being polluted. All the Hindu women in this study explained that they did not light the lamp, which is a part of worship, in their homes during these days. Reasons for not lighting the lamp included being so used to not lighting the lamp during menstruation that it was rarely questioned and 'just following what I was told to do'. During the period of forty days the women did not attend temple services. The period following childbirth, therefore, was one in which a Hindu woman would be seen as 'polluted'. Social and religious sanctions were placed on certain activities like cooking.

These findings are very similar to a previous studies done in India (Jacobson, 1989; Thompson, 1985). Jacobson (1989) found that women are absolved from the responsibility of cooking after giving birth and from participation in religious worship services. These findings are also similar to those of a South African study done by Chalmers (1993). Chalmers observed that ritual pollution from childbirth lasts for 30 days amongst Hindu women. After this period of 'contamination' a ritual bath is taken (ibid.) Before giving birth, Hindu women return to their natal homes where they are taken care of by their mothers and other family members (ibid.).

In contrast to this, when the Christian women in this study were asked about religious or cultural restrictions after childbirth, all six women said that there were none. It was emphasized that the sooner a newborn was taken to church, the better it was for the child and the parents (Callagher, 1984). There were no religious restrictions in terms

of attending church or more simply a woman was not seen as being 'too polluted' to enter a church. With regard to cooking, five women remained in their marital homes after giving birth. Of these, three cooked for themselves and their families and two had their mothers-in-law cooking for them. Thus, there were no cultural or religious restrictions on cooking and women were not seen as too polluted' to cook.

At this point, I wish to examine beliefs on pollution in relation to structural-functional theories of menstruation. Structural-functional theories seek to analyze how the fundamental structural parts of social systems can be analyzed in terms of the 'functions' they fulfil within a social system. For example, Douglas also argues that pollution beliefs have different functions in society. Pollution beliefs, she argues, reinforce the social and cultural structure. Dangers attached to pollution act to ensure conformity and serve as punishment for wrongdoing. In keeping with the aims of structural-functional theories, at this point I wish to pose the question "what function do pollution beliefs have in the case of Hindu and Christian women in my study?" My central argument is that pollution beliefs have the function of perpetuating female inferiority and, in some cases, male dominance. Furthermore, pollution beliefs function to reinforce the ambivalent position of women. In the case of the Hindu women, there were various religious and cultural restrictions placed on them during menstruation. Firstly, a menstruating woman does not light the lamp in the home. This, I would argue, has the effect of making her feel that she is 'impure' at certain times of the month. Not only is she impure then, but since men are always allowed to light the lamp, she is, by definition, 'less pure' than a man is. The women I interviewed often mentioned that during menstruation their husbands would light the lamp for them. Secondly, a menstruating woman may not attend any temple service or

religious function. Since women menstruate, they are often excluded from leadership positions in temple committees and from becoming priests. According to Chetty (1992) women are not allowed to enter the sanctum where deities are kept because of their 'unclean' lives due to the pollution that results from menstruation and childbirth. Men who are married and therefore sexually active are allowed entrance into a temple and the altar at all times. Here, pollution beliefs help to ensure male dominance. Since women are not always 'clean' to attend temple, men assume that they have to take positions of leadership. Thirdly, most women in this study performed some sort of cleansing rituals after the cessation of their menses. This causes them to feel like they are 'less clean' than men and in need of purification.

Pollution beliefs after childbirth have similar functions. For example beliefs about not cooking after childbirth function to give women a break from daily activities. On one level, by abstaining from cooking a woman is given time off to rest and take care of herself and her child. On another level, restricting a woman who has just given birth from cooking prevents other family members from becoming 'polluted'. Here the pollution belief surrounding cooking serves to instill a sense of fear of contaminating others if they were to ingest food cooked by her (Jacobson, 1989). By virtue of the fact that a woman bleeds after childbirth, she is seen as being capable of 'contaminating' others. However, at no stage of a man's life is he ever seen as capable of 'contaminating' others. Therefore, the belief that women should be exempt from cooking serves to perpetuate gender inferiority. During the period after childbirth a woman is also confined to the house for a period of forty days. On the one hand, childbirth is seen as auspicious (ibid.). Women are revered for being mothers. On the other hand, childbirth is a time of extreme pollution that requires a period of

seclusion. This pollution is so intense that it is transmitted to the new-born whose hair has to be shaved in order to ensure purification from pollution that occurred in uterine life (Chalmers, 1993). So, on the one hand, childbirth seclusion is functional in that it keeps the mother and child together and separate from society and on the other, it makes a woman feel 'dirty' and 'impure' After childbirth, as is also the case during menstruation, a woman may not light the lamp. This, I believe is an example of Hinduism's ambivalence towards women. On the one hand women are respected as *lakshmis* (bringers of good fortune) and on the other, she is too contaminated to light the lamp. Thus, we see that pollution beliefs also serve to reinforce the ambiguous and often contradictory position of Hindu women in society.

To the best of my knowledge, there is very little that has been written about 'pollution' that occurs after childbirth in Christianity. To return to my previous argument: Jesus himself rejected notions of bodily impurity and concentrated more on purity of character. Childbirth, therefore, was not a period of intense impurity as it was in Hinduism. In Judaism, women were regarded as 'impure' after childbirth and this period was lengthened if the child was female (Frank, 1993) but Christianity seemed to have lost this aspect of her Jewish inheritance since more emphasis was placed on purity of character.

Drawing on what I believe to be the strength of Mary Douglas's structural-functional theory of pollution, it was argued that dirt is a relative idea and what is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another. This is especially the case with menstrual blood. In Judaism, the blood that resulted from circumcision was not regarded as unclean whereas a menstruating woman was (Eilberg Swartz, 1990).

Blood in relation to men is a 'pure' substance but is 'impure' in relation to women. Similarly, in Hinduism, blood sacrifice is a traditional part of local festivals. In Kwa Zulu Natal, goats and chickens are offered during the festival period. These sacrifices are offered by individuals in fulfillment of vows made to the Goddess (Diesel, 1998). Blood in relation to animals is 'clean' but menstrual blood, unlike the blood of animals, is regarded as 'polluting' in Hinduism. This, I would argue, ensures that women feel inferior to men as a result of their natural bodily functions.

In his book 'The Raw and the Cooked' (1969), Levi Strauss argues that what we know about the external world we apprehend through our senses. The phenomena which we perceive have the characteristics which we attribute to them because of the way the human brain is designed to order and interpret the stimuli which are fed into it (Leach, 1970). One feature of this ordering process is that we cut up the continua of space and time with which we are surrounded into segments so that we are predisposed to think of the environment as consisting of numbers of separate things belonging to named classes and to think of the passage of time as consisting of sequences of separate events. Levi Strauss (cited in Leach, 1970) argues that most human societies process food by cooking. The principal modes of cooking, he argues, form a sort of structured set. More specifically, roasting is a process where meat is brought into direct contact with the agent of conversion without the mediation of any cultural apparatus, boiling requires the mediation of water and a receptacle which is an object of culture and smoking is accomplished without the mediation of any cultural apparatus. The significant thing about such categories is that they are accorded different levels of social prestige. For example, according to our conventions, when the menu includes a dish of roast meat, the meat will often be put

in the middle and boiled foods on the side. The high status which is attached to roasting against boiling is claimed by Levi-Strauss to be a universal cultural characteristic (ibid.). Returning to my study, I would argue that menstrual blood is also part of our mental scheme of organizing things into categories in order to simplify the social world. According to our mental categorization, then, saliva could be thought as being 'cleaner' than blood from a cut, but blood from a cut is 'less clean' than menstrual blood. From this structural-functional perspective, menstrual blood is not accorded a high level of prestige and has negative connotations, which seem to be universal in nature.

6.9 ATTITUDES TOWARDS MENSTRUAL BLOOD

Considering the religious and cultural restrictions and beliefs that menstruation is 'polluting' in Hinduism, one would expect that these restrictions and beliefs would influence women's attitudes about menstrual blood. The results of my study seem to confirm this. Amongst the Hindu women in my study, four of six saw menstrual blood as 'dirty', 'contaminated' or described it in negative ways. Of these four women, two felt that menstrual blood was unclean because it was associated with the genitals. All four women explained that menstrual blood was not like other blood because blood from a cut, for instance, is clean whereas menstrual blood is contaminated.

Two of the Hindu women expressed more positive attitudes towards menstrual blood, explaining that it was 'natural' and not unclean. However, one of these two women said that what was taught to her was the opposite of her attitude toward menstrual blood. Parents and society taught her that menstrual blood was 'dirty' and made one

ritually impure. The two women who expressed positive attitudes towards menstrual blood were both employed outside the home. The other four women in this study were housewives. Thus, there seemed to be a relationship between occupation and beliefs about menstrual blood. A probable explanation would be that these women were more exposed to the outside world than the women who were housewives. Consequently, they could have been exposed to more 'modern' ideas on menstruation.

The belief that menstrual blood is 'dirty', I would argue, is part of the Hindu religious and cultural belief that menstrual blood is contaminating. A study by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (1994) found that menstrual blood is believed to be polluted and polluting. Because of this, women are urged not to pray, fast or perform religious rituals. The Laws of Manu say that a man's virility diminishes if and when he approaches a menstruating woman (Schmidt, 1989). The belief that menstrual blood is 'dirty' confirms Homan's (1982) findings where Hindu women believed that they were 'impure' because of menstruation. In this comparative study, Homans shows that British women, on the other hand were not that aware of menstrual taboos. As was already mentioned, childbirth is also considered 'polluting' because of the loss of menstrual blood (Jacobson, 1989) and Hindu women often observe a post-partum period of pollution which lasts forty days after childbirth (Jacobson, 1989).

When asked whether they considered the bleeding that occurred after childbirth to be unclean, all the Hindu women in this study said 'no'. Almost all the women emphasized that 'it was a natural thing' and was therefore not unclean. The question now arises: 'why do these women consider menstrual blood unclean, but the blood associated with childbirth to be natural?' My explanation would be that motherhood

in highly valued in this particular community and consequently they see blood associated with childbirth in a more positive light than ordinary menstrual blood.

Amongst the Christian women in my study three said that menstrual blood was not unclean and that it was 'natural' and three women felt that menstrual blood was 'unclean' or 'dirty'. Here again, I noticed a correlation between level of education and negative attitudes towards menstrual blood. Two of the three women that described menstrual blood in negative ways had below standard eight level of schooling. Only one woman felt that the bleeding after childbirth was 'unclean'. The rest felt that the bleeding was normal and two women said that 'you have to get rid of the blood'.

When taking both the Hindu and Christian women's views on menstrual blood into account, we find that their negative views are similar to those of Britton (1996) who found that women used words like 'yucky' and 'dirt' to describe menstruation. Similarly, Laws found that women described their menstrual blood in negative terms.

If one had to ask 'why do these women have such negative attitudes towards menstruation', I would argue that they were socialized into believing that menstruation is 'dirty'. Socialization, which can be defined as the 'process of interaction through which an individual acquires norms, values, beliefs, attitudes and language characteristics of his or her group' (Borgatta and Borgatta, 1976) is a process whereby a helpless infant becomes a knowledgeable person, skilled in the ways of the culture in which he or she is born. There are various agencies of socialization such as the family, schools, peer groups and the mass media (Giddens, 1989). Thus, if menstruation is seen as 'taboo' or 'dirty' by members of a particular

culture and by various agencies of socialization, it is likely that many women would adopt these beliefs. This will be explained in greater detail in the section below. Furthermore, I would argue that religious or cultural beliefs about menstrual blood affect the way women of a particular religion view their own menstrual blood. For instance, many of the Hindu women used the word 'contaminated' to describe menstrual blood. Ideas about contaminations are linked to Hindu beliefs that menstrual blood is defiling.

6.10 SEXUAL INTERCOURSE DURING MENSTRUATION

When asked about how they felt about sexual intercourse during menstruation the Hindu and Christian women in this study expressed similar views. Almost all the Hindu women disagreed with the concept of sexual intercourse during menstruation as it was seen as 'too messy' and 'dirty'. All the Christian women said that they would not have sex during menstruation as it was 'gross' and 'dirty'. As was explained earlier on in this chapter, the early Christians rejected Levitical codes of ritual impurity, especially where menstruation was concerned. Jesus was more concerned with purity of a person's character than physical impurities. At the same time however, Christianity did not entirely lose its Jewish inheritance. This, I believe is the case here. That the Christian women in my study would emphatically disagree with the concept of sex during menstruation and regard it as taboo, is an example of a Levitical taboo that Christianity inherited and is one that has persisted with the passing of time.

6.11 HOW FEMININITIES ARE SHAPED BY RELIGION AND CULTURE

In order to explain how femininities are mediated by religion and culture I now pose the question ‘what does it mean to be a Hindu woman?’ and ‘how does this differ from being a Christian woman?’ From the results above it is possible to conclude that being a Hindu woman means that there will be a great deal of social pressure to be married, have a marital relationship where domesticity and child-rearing are considered important, face religious restrictions during menstruation and childbirth. Being a Christian woman means that there is less pressure to be married, have a marital relationship based on equality and an absence of religious restrictions surrounding menstruation and childbirth. Being ‘feminine’ would mean a choice of whether to be married or single, being considered an equal partner in marriage and the freedom to ‘get on with life’ even during menstruation and childbirth.

In this section I have tried to show that religion and culture shape femininities considerably. For instance, in the case of Hindu women, religious restrictions during menstruation are very likely to cause a fear of sex during pregnancy and negative attitudes toward menstrual blood. Menstrual taboos, in this case, have their origin in culture. Thus, how we act and what we think are shaped by religion and culture. Religion and culture also shapes how we think about our bodies.

Bartky (1988, 64) argues that “we are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement...” She examines those disciplinary practices that produce a body, which is recognizably feminine in gesture and appearance. For instance, women subject themselves to the discipline of dieting to achieve a slim body and women are more restricted than men in gestures, postures and

movement. These disciplinary practices, she concludes, produce a 'body on which an inferior status has been inscribed' (Bartky, 1988, 71). Similarly, I have tried to show that adherence to 'pollution beliefs' has the effect of contributing to gender inferiority where a woman feels that she is 'dirty' because she cannot cook, attend temple or light the lamp during menstruation. Since men do not menstruate their bodies must be seen to by these women to be inherently superior to their 'defective' female bodies.

While 'pollution beliefs' which are part of religion and culture shape women's actions and thoughts to a great extent, I would argue that women are not just passive victims of cultural practices. In her book on female sexualization, Frigga Hauge (1987, 79) talks about 'female participation in the reinforcement of women's subordinate status'. She describes how women can resist the position of 'sexual object'. Resistance, she argues, can be directed against the gaze of men and the dictates of fashion by choosing to have short hair or wear baggy trousers, for example. In the same way, the women in my study were not just passive victims of culture. One Hindu woman explains that:

"You know we've always believed in the Gods and Goddesses. The Goddesses are female themselves. I mean they are just as females as ourselves. You mean they didn't go through menstruation etceteras? And if they are kept in a *mandir*⁶ there, why should we feel uncomfortable because we are bleeding now and we can't go and pray to them? I've changed. I go and light the lamp after the third day but not in the first day. I don't feel comfortable. I go after the third day to the temple not because I feel physically dirty but because I feel weak and tired."

⁶ temple

something 'dirty'. She also chose when she wanted to light the lamp and go to temple. This extract shows how this woman questioned whether she was 'dirty' during menstruation as she was taught to believe. She concluded that since the Goddesses in the temple were also female and went through menstruation, her menstruation was not the temple and decided on the third day for practical rather than religious reasons. This extract shows that is possible to question and contest cultural beliefs rather than being a passive victim of them.

Finally, I wish to add that sociologists have seen the process of becoming 'feminine' as the result of training from birth. Gender conformity brings material benefits; for instance, trying to please one's peers by behaving in a certain way brings their approval. Mills (1992) argues that sociologists tend to see femininity as a set of homogenous practices, a unified role that has to be learned when femininity in fact a set of loosely defined heterogeneous practices rather than a coherent role. I would also argue that factors like class, race and education have an influence on the formation of feminine identities and this was evident in the interviews.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have shown that there were a number of similarities and differences in the Hindu and Christian women's responses. Both the Hindu and Christian women in this study linked femininity to motherhood. A woman was only seen as 'complete' after giving birth. Motherhood was something that was 'normal' or 'natural'. Both the Christian and the Hindu women expressed a high level of societal pressure to bear sons, although, in most cases, the women themselves were happy with the sex of their children. Regarding unmarried women, it was found that the Christian women expressed a more positive attitude towards being single than the Hindu women. The Hindu women felt that it was not socially unacceptable to remain single. The Christian women expressed positive attitudes towards sexual intercourse during pregnancy whereas two of the Hindu women felt that an expectant mother should be careful during the first and last months and two felt that it was unnecessary to have sex during menstruation. The Hindu women faced religious restrictions after childbirth. For the first ten days they were considered to be 'most polluting'. This period of pollution ended forty days after giving birth and was marked by a ritual bath. Women refrained from lighting the lamp in their homes, cooking and attending temple during this period. In contrast, Christian women faced no religious restrictions after childbirth. Women were encouraged to baptize their infants as soon as possible. A possible reason for the absence of taboos surrounding childbirth in Christianity could be that these taboos fell away as Christianity distinguished herself from Judaism. In addition, Hindu women also faced religious restrictions surrounding menstruation, which the Christian women did not face. Regarding attitudes towards menstrual blood there was a similarity between the Christian and Hindu women's

responses in that negative attitudes towards menstrual blood seemed to be correlated with levels of education and occupation.

In light of the above similarities and differences, we can see that culture and religion play a large role in shaping what we believe and how we see ourselves. For example, in Hinduism menstruation is seen as an impurity. Consequently, four of the six Hindu women in this study felt that they were 'dirty' or unclean' during menstruation. It is extremely disturbing that the women themselves considered themselves to be polluting. Femininity, then, is linked to being 'less pure' than men are and a sense that the female body is defective in some way. Religion and culture also shape our attitudes about what is 'acceptable' and what is not. The Christian women in this study thought that it was acceptable to attend church after giving birth, but the Hindu women felt that attending temple was unacceptable.

What was equally disturbing, was the fact that the Hindu women considered themselves to be polluting was the fact that culture or religion was seldom challenged. Most of the Hindu women described how conditioned they were to the idea that they were unclean during menstruation that they seldom questioned whether they should light the lamp in their homes. This practice was so taken for granted that only one woman questioned whether she was really 'unclean'. Interestingly, this woman was more highly educated than the rest. More women, I think should be encouraged to critically examine and question elements of culture that hold women back from attaining gender equality. Those customs and traditions which hold women back from achieving gender equality should be abandoned and those which ensure equality

should be retained. I would also argue that femininity is constructed in a negative light if women see themselves as unclean. This belief that one is unclean is a result of socialization. For this reason, mothers as agents of socialization have an important role to play in portraying positive images of femininity and by challenging cultural beliefs.

In the previous chapter I argued that 'pollution beliefs' reinforce cultural and social structure. 'Pollution beliefs' function to perpetuate gender inferiority. For example the cultural belief that menstrual blood is defiling in Hinduism serves to benefit men as women are prevented from becoming priests and approaching the altar at temples during menstruation. In this way, women are prevented from attaining leadership positions within temple structures. 'Pollution beliefs' also function to enhance the ambivalent position of women in religion. In Hinduism, women are revered as mothers and bringers of good fortune, but at the same time, they are regarded as impure during menstruation.

As structural-functionalists (e.g. Douglas, 1960) argue, pollution beliefs derive from ordering and classifying experience. Menstrual blood seems to be a universal taboo. In early Christianity menstrual blood was seen as being more unclean than animal blood and more unclean than semen. Thus we seem to have some form of menstrual scheme of classifying things as 'cleaner', 'less clean' and so on. Menstruation still seems to be something 'less clean' in our mental schemes. Consequently, there is a great deal of silence about menstruation.

As was shown in the previous chapters, religion and culture set the norms for what is 'feminine' and what is not. The Hindu women in my sample explained that their roles as wives were to cook and take care of the children whereas their husbands role was to be the provider. Religion and culture also determine who is valued more: male or female children, married or unmarried women and who is more polluted: men or women. At the same time, women are not just passive victims of culture but have an important role to play in critically examining and questioning culture.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

Age, residential area, living arrangements, occupation, partner's occupation, education, how many children, religion.

Own Birth

1. Can you remember any details of your birth from your parents [born in hospital or at home]
2. Where were you born?
3. Was anyone present at your birth?
4. Were any naming/christening ceremonies conducted for you?
5. As a child did anyone teach you about 'feminine' behaviour?
6. As a child can you describe the type of relationship you had with your mother?
And your father?

Pregnancy

7. During your wedding ceremony did you take any vows relating to children?
8. Can you describe your reaction when you heard that you were pregnant with your first child? And your husband's reaction?
9. Why did you decide to have a child?
10. Can you explain whether motherhood is important in Hinduism/Christianity?
Why?
11. Did you perform any special prayers/rituals during pregnancy?
12. Did you observe any dietary restrictions?
13. Many people think that there should be a restriction on sexual activity during pregnancy – what is your opinion?

Childbirth

14. Can you describe the experience of giving birth to your first child?
15. Who was present?
16. Can you describe the routine followed at the hospital [shaving, enemas]
17. How were you treated?
18. What were the best and worst experiences of giving birth?
19. What was your reaction to the sex of the child? Your family's reaction?
20. During childbirth a lot of blood is lost. Did you feel that you were 'unclean' or 'impure' during this time? And after childbirth? Is this blood more 'unclean' than menstrual blood?
21. Was childbirth a spiritual experience for you? How?
22. Can you describe the type of care you received after childbirth? Who took care of you?
23. After childbirth were any religious/cultural restrictions placed on you in terms of sexual intercourse?
24. Was there anything religious that you were not allowed to do after childbirth?
25. Did you attend church/temple after childbirth? After how many days? [feelings about this]
26. Did you cook after giving birth? After how many days.
27. Can you describe the naming ritual of your child [if Hindu: why is the baby's head shaved? If Christian: why is water poured over the child's head during baptism]
28. Is motherhood important to your sense of being a woman? Explain?

Menstruation

26. Can you describe your adolescent years?
29. Can you describe your experience of your first period? [who told you about it, what did they say, did they say you were not allowed to perform certain religious activities? Certain physical activities?]
30. Was menstruation something that was talked about? Was sex talked about?
31. Were any religious/cultural rituals performed when you had your first period?
32. At-present how does menstruation make you feel about being a woman?
33. Would you say that menstrual blood is like other blood (e.g. blood from a wound)? What words would you use to describe menstrual blood? Is it 'dirty'?
34. Some Hindus/Christians consider menstrual blood to be 'unclean'. Are any other bodily fluids considered unclean? Which ones? [if Hindu: which hand is used for eating? Which hand is used for washing?]

Religion

32. Would you consider yourself to be religious? What religious activities do you perform?
33. How are unmarried women seen in Christianity/Hinduism?
35. What sort of relationship is supposed to exist between a husband and wife in Hinduism/Christianity?
36. What are the central Christian/Hindu beliefs about having children? About sex?
37. What are the duties of a Hindu/Christian woman towards her husband? Towards her family?
38. What rules of etiquette are followed in a temple/church? What are some of the things that are not allowed?
39. Do you perform any fasts or prayers for the well-being of your family or husband?
40. Are there any women from Hindu/Christian scriptures that you admire? Any women that you do not admire?

Miscellaneous Questions

41. Are there any advantages to being a woman? Any disadvantages?
42. If you could chose your sex what would you choose? If you could choose the sex of your children what would you choose?
43. Have you spoken to anyone else about childbirth? Do you think it is important to speak about it?
44. Do you have anything else to add?

Thank you